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# Universe

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## THE CALIBRATED PEOPLE

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Wm. Campbell Gault—Gordon S. Dickson—Mark Clifton—Sylvia Jacobs—Roger Flint Young

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***GEORGE BELL***
***Editor***

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# Universe
SCIENCE FICTION

*Issue #2*

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# The CALIBRATED

***In the world of tomorrow, citizenship is not just a matter of nationalism — not when you become an adult at ten, and decide you are going to be the ultimate of citizenship — the calibrated man! Jon was ten, and he wanted to be a space pilot, which meant — calibration!***

"This is the biggest choice you'll ever make, pal," the man behind the desk said. The ten-year-old boy standing before him shifted to the other foot and said nothing.

"You're of age, now, Jon, and strictly on your own — a class B citizen of the System. It's up to you now to decide how much schooling you want, and what it will be, and what you want to train for in life. Your parents have nothing to say about you any more; they have no further obligations to look after you except to provide your minimum subsistence for the next six years."

"I know all that, sir. I'm going to be a spacer." The boy spoke rather patiently, as though he were quite aware that he was considered the equal of the forty-year-old man in front of him. "I want to go through basic training, join the academy, and learn small-planet mining engineering. I've thought it over very carefully, and I've got no romantic notions about space-pirates or about making a big fortune at it. My uncle was a small-planet engineer, and he's given me the straight story about what I can expect, and I know I'll like the work. I'm a natural-born spacer, Mr. Cady."

"OK, Jon," the man smiled. "I think you've got the stuff it takes, and Basic will give you the little polish you'll need to finish

# PEOPLE

*by*

**W. T. POWERS**

up the job. If you get past Calibration, you'll be a big success, I'm sure. Good luck. Take these forms home and . . ."

"I've already filled them out, sir — here they are." Jon handed over a sheaf of forms neatly filled in by typewriter. The man named Cady looked surprised and pleased, and after a brief scan, accepted the papers.

"You're not wasting any time, are you?" Cady said. "All right,

*"Whoops, there goes our first one," said the instructor. "That you, Jon?" "Yes sir," said Jon, his face burning with embarrassment, as he spun slowly aloft into space.*

how soon do you want to leave for Basic?"

"Today, sir," Jon answered firmly. "I brought my bags and I've taken care of all my affairs. I'll have time for lunch and signing in before the 15:00 express leaves for Luna, if you can arrange for passage that soon."

Cady looked narrowly at Jon, and asked kindly, "Son, are you getting away from something?"

"Yes, sir," Jon said.

"Mind if I ask what?"

"I don't mind if you ask, sir, but I'd rather not say. Just family troubles."

"All right. Come back in here at 14:30 and I'll have the admission papers ready for you to sign, and your passage papers. Good luck."

"Thanks a lot, sir. I appreciate your help." Jon turned and walked out the door, Cady staring after him, puzzlement on his face.

"Family trouble!" Jon snorted to himself. "Hah!" If Cady could have heard his father and mother hollering at him yesterday he'd know why Jon wanted to get away one day after his tenth birthday. They might even have tried to keep him home by force, if he hadn't threatened to report them to the police. They had never understood him . . . futile anger brought red to Jon's face, and to hide it, he window-shopped, or pretended to, as he rode the sidewalk along toward town.

Sudden fear, mingled with the hatred, made a sinking feeling in his stomach. They couldn't touch him any more, but what had they done to him already? Nowadays, a kid had more than half a chance to grow up without any serious mental tensions, what with the way schools were run, and with most kids' parents pretty well-versed in human psychology. That is, he had more than half a chance if his parents were half intelligent about raising their kids. But his parents were pretty bad off. Always fighting with each other and with him — they'd even tried to spank him once (he couldn't quite remember if they had succeeded or not) and they were always trying to tell him how he should think, what he should be, what was right for him and wrong for him and good for him and bad for him. He remembered in seventh grade once, after a big fight at home, he had been so nervous that he came in last in the needle-shoot between his school and Carver High. He was still in pretty good shape most of the time, but what would happen during Calibration? A guy had to be in top physical and mental shape to get through Calibration, and even with a natural aptitude for spacing, he feared he would never be able to judge milli-Gs and S-orbits.

Jon took an oath to himself: "If my parents have messed me

up so I can't make it through Calibration, I'll get 'em into Children's Court and really make 'em pay up." Then he remembered that as a class B citizen, he no longer had recourse to Children's Court, and revised his oath to read, "Get 'em into Psychopathic Detention." Semi-automatically, through years of training, he began to review all the incidents in which he had felt the same way, and then cut himself off angrily.

"Nuts to that!" he whispered. "They're not going to get off that easy!" With an effort he repressed the knowledge that he was paraphrasing his mother's angry scolding, and quite content with the warm feeling of planned revenge that lurked under his sternum, began looking into the windows he was passing.

Ordinarily, the little bit of adrenalin that caused that warm sensation would have produced whole subsets of muscular efforts, which in the past would have carried him out of the house or up to his room, away from his parents. Not being on his way either up or out, but being seated on a moving sidewalk, Jon had the choice of stopping the adrenalin and losing the "pleasant" feeling, or countering the subliminal tendencies to move. He chose the latter; he set up another set of equal and opposite efforts, scarcely noticed, and "relaxed" back into the chair.

He got off the sidewalk near the center of town and took an escalator to the fourth level, where he caught an air-cab. C-citizens, kids nine and under, were not allowed alone above the third level, and to Jon there was an exhilaration, a sense of freedom, in the act of handing a fifty-hundredths piece to the thirteen-year-old aircab driver and asking, "Where's a good class B restaurant?"

"You just make your class B?" the other asked, hauling back the wheel and sending the two-ton cab into the air.

"Yesterday," Jon replied, somewhat disappointed that his age still showed.

"Good deal. Got any ideas what you're going to do?"

"Yeah—mining engineer, small planets. I'm leaving for the academy today."

"The 15:00 liner? Want me to pick you up?"

"Naw, I'll make it by myself."

The thirteen-year-old grinned without saying anything, and swung his cab sharply downward, hovering a brief instant before a gentle landing. "Congratulations, k— fellow." he said. "Good luck in Calibration."

"Thanks, pal," Jon said, hopping out. "See you."

He ate in Skippy's Hash-House, "A B-ootiful place to eat, run by B's for B's." The waitresses and waiters were all around eleven or twelve and the manager, who

stood helping a new cashier check customers out, was no more than thirteen.

In New York of 2364, class B citizens were in charge of most of the city's utilities, eating-places, transportation, and department-stores (although the largest stores were still run by A's). With the experience gained in using and managing the products of the culture, the B-citizens progressed into more advanced managerial, engineering, and planning jobs, with a sound basis in practice and the knowledge that the lower echelons were being handled by competent and interested people. The rapid-learning properties of adolescents enabled them to grasp the mechanics of a great number of jobs in relatively short time, so that a man or woman of ten could count on trying his hand at half-a-dozen widely varied jobs before he reached sixteen and A-citizenship, and of course every B-level job served as groundwork for entry into any one of many more advanced fields. The system still had its drawbacks — there were a few jobs that were not popular enough to draw sufficient personnel, and pending the development of good enough automatic machinery, B-citizens were required to spend some of their time doing these jobs. Also there were still families here and there that clung to their ideas held over from older days, families who taught their children that some jobs were just *better* than others, so that the children got the idea that they couldn't do exactly what interested them if it didn't fit what they had been taught about the prestige value of a job. Most of these chose to live the lives of drones, and many of those ended up in psychiatric clinics. The drones were generally the low-drive people, whose parents insisted on self-regimentation rather than self-understanding. As a whole, however, the system was developing naturally; as people in general incorporated fundamental knowledge of human nature more and more into everyday living, the children matured into responsible adults earlier and earlier, demanding more and more responsibility sooner in life, and through the gradual lessening of adults' resistance, were admitted at increasingly younger ages into positions which the adults were often all too willing to turn over to the youngsters. The process had taken centuries to progress this far, and it would be centuries more before even the classes of citizenship were eliminated. For all practical purposes, in the year 2364, people were treated like people no matter what their age, despite a few anachronisms and fumbles committed here and there.

Jon made it back to Mr. Cady's office by 14:15, and picked up the manila envelope containing his

passage papers, academy entrance-papers, and travel allowance. Just before he was ready to leave, Mr. Cady leaned over to the intercom.

"Is Alf in, yet? Well, tell him to walk right in when he shows." He turned back to Jon and said, "Got a little surprise for you — you'll be travelling with a friend of mine."

Jon smiled politely, but felt resentment. He could travel alone without any help from adults. "Who is it, sir?"

"Man named Alfred Cory. He's done a lot of travelling, and he might be able to . . ." The door-annunciator interrupted him.

"Hi, Harry," said the man who walked in. "This my passenger?"

Jon held out his hand, but the newly-acquired aplomb of the B-citizen was quite gone. Alf wore the uniform of Intrasystem Spacelines, and the tiny concentric circles in silver on his jacket lapels meant that he held Senior Pilot's rating — a genuine Calibrated Man, the first one Jon had ever met in person.

"Gee!" Jon said astutely. "How do you do, sir?"

"I'm Alf," Alf said. "Glad to know you. Better get going, hadn't we?"

Jon flashed a jubilant, grateful smile at Mr. Cady as he followed Alf out the door, and then his attention was all on the tall man swinging down the corridor in front of him. He felt suddenly awkward and tense watching the smooth flow of action as the pilot walked along.

"I've got my tin can parked here," Alf said. "Ten minutes to the field." Jon piled into the little flier at Alf's gesture.

"Want to fly it?" Alf asked, before he got in.

"N-no, sir," Jon said. He felt as if he couldn't fly a kiddy-car.

They rose in a single smooth curve that ended heading west in the 5000-foot traffic-lane. In Jon's somewhat exaggerated perceptions, no flier had ever flown so smoothly or in such a *straight* straight line. Neither said a word to the other the rest of the way; they landed at the field and went into the ad building.

"Let's see your luggage stubs," Alf said. Jon fumbled in his envelope and produced two yellow cards. "There's your window," Alf said. "Meet me in the ship — I'll leave word with the purser." He turned and pushed through the crowd, disappearing through a door marked "Employees Only."

Jon pulled out of his semi-trance and turned to the window. He held each one of his cards up against a little glass panel, one after the other, and in a few moments his two old battered suitcases slid down a shute into the window. He picked them up and got in line for his ship, the "Mare Imbrium."

He suddenly realized how far

he had to go. He was aware that, after all, he was only two days removed from official childhood, and that he had not changed in any magical way when his B-citizen's card was handed to him. He suddenly felt as if his six years of schooling were a tiny card-file stuck away in one insignificant corner of his brain, while the rest of him was still new and blank. All the algebra, calculus, physics, history, economics, that had been poured into him with marvellous efficiency, and which he had soaked up with verve and fascination, seemed now completely inadequate for dealing with the vast deep of space and its mysteries and dangers.

"Let's see your ticket, kid . . . beg pardon — *sir*, and congratulations!"

How far above him the Calibrated Man Alf seemed! And how long the months and years stretched before him; a year and a half of Basic Training, then six months of Calibration, then the academy for five more years, maybe more. The academy, that is, *if* he got through Calibration — otherwise he could kiss his idea of being Senior Pilot: Engineer, Mining, goodbye. You can't get Calibrated very well if you're too old when you finally make it. The anger against his parents rose again, and he had a fleeting fantasy of kicking his father in the face. *If they have ruined me for Calibration . . .*

"Jon Becket?" The purser standing beside the gangway jerked his thumb toward another gangway to Jon's right. "In this way, I'll show you where to go."

Jon blanked out his train of thought with an effort, balanced out his anger with another little muscular tension. He followed the man to the smaller gangway with no escalator, up through a hatch, and into a cargo-shaft.

"We'll catch the elevator here. Ever been in space before?"

"No, sir," Jon said.

"Well, you'll have a good chance to find out all about it. Lucky kid, you are. Not many boys your age get to ride up front, especially on their first flight. Captain Cory is one of the best — watch well, boy."

"Sir, I'm B-class. My name is Jon Becket."

"Say, you don't look it! Sorry, Mr. Becket. Then you'll . . . here's the elevator, hop in . . . then you'll be going off to the academy, I'll bet ten credits. Gonna be a pilot?"

"Yes sir." Jon was burning inside at the purser's patronizing tone. The purser quite obviously didn't take B-citizenship too seriously and Jon felt he would appear foolish if he pressed the point. Now Alf talks to you like a *person*, he thought.

"Here y'are," the purser said, adding with a jovial smirk, "through that hatch, *Mr.* Becket."

Jon went into the corridor and through the hatch without a word, and found himself in the pilot's compartment. Alf was already there, strapped into the pilot's seat.

"Hi, Jon." Alf waved without looking. "Take the observer's chair, strap in tight, and don't talk until I give you the go-ahead. Getting ready for takeoff." He spoke rapidly and softly, and attended no further to Jon.

Filled with suppressed excitement, Jon walked elaborately on tiptoe to the observer's chair, and with great caution, slid in. He worked the straps around himself, careful not to let the clamps click, and sat still, scarcely breathing, his eyes darting around the compartment and back again and again to Alf.

Alf sat quietly with his eyes closed, his fingers curled easily over the control-knobs at the ends of the arms of his seat. Before him in a plain grey panel was a fifty-inch screen which Jon knew could show any part of space outside the ship at a flick of Alf's finger. Above the screen was a clock, and on each side of the screen, two small meter-faces, and that was all. A small dot indicated the center of the screen, and over the face of the screen was a tracery of concentric circles laid over a rectangular coordinate-grid, all etched very lightly into the plastic.

Alf curled his right little finger around the arm of the chair, and touched a button, without opening his eyes. A mike swung smoothly down in front of him, and Alf said quietly, "Thirty seconds, everybody. Get ready to blast." The mike swung up out of the way again. Jon tried to count the seconds, keeping track of the time without watching the clock, the way Alf did. He was excited and finished ten seconds too early, so he watched Alf carefully to see if he pecked — he didn't.

As the second-hand passed zero, Alf squeezed with both hands, and Jon was pressed violently back into his seat, which swung flat and opened up flatter. He was surprised for an instant, until he remembered that of course the pilot's compartment could not be inertia-shielded. Then his surprise gave way to awareness of discomfort, and he concentrated on breathing while three g's tried to pull him through the reclining chair. All his muscles were tense, and he wondered how a pilot could stay calibrated through all of this.

Abruptly the acceleration ceased, and springs brought the chair back to normal position; Jon hung weightless, waiting to see if he was going to be space-sick.

"See if you can feel this," Alf said. Jon waited, rigidly in contact with the seat.

"Feel it?"

Jon hadn't felt a thing. "I — I don't think so," he said.

"That was a 200 micro-G quartering thrust, eighteen seconds. A little bit wee for a beginner to detect. Only a finicky old jockey like me would have bothered. How do you feel?"

"All right," Jon said. "I guess I don't get sick."

"Good. Let's get the lights out and the screen on, now." He accomplished both as he spoke, and Jon found himself staring into quite an ordinary view of the night sky, the gibbous moon way over at one side of the screen, occupying a spot perhaps a centimeter in diameter. Then he realized that it wasn't quite ordinary, because it was three o'clock of a summer afternoon, and those were winter constellations in the sky. He felt a little shiver as he realized that the hot summer sun was just the sun, now, the same all the time, and that if he were outside looking at those stars now he would suffocate and his blood would boil and he would freeze. Two feet beyond that bulkhead, Space began and went on from there forever.

"Does — does it feel any different to be Calibrated?" Jon asked.

"Pretty much," Alf agreed. "You feel a lot better, for one thing. You've probably got lots of little aches and pains that you're used to and never notice — you notice the difference when you get rid of them. Can you feel your heart?"

"Sure." Jon pulled his hand out of the straps and moved it toward his chest, and missed. "Hey!" he said, alarmed. Concentrating very hard, he got his hand on his chest. "What's wrong? My arm won't work right!"

"That's free-flight," Alf grinned. "You've got to get used to not fighting gravity all the time. You're still moving your arm as if it weighed something instead of nothing, and the extra pull of the muscles sends your arm shooting off in all directions. You'll get used to it. But I meant, can you feel your heart from *inside?* Can you feel it pumping away?"

"Well — sort of." Jon thought he could feel it, but it was vague.

"You'll be able to feel the valves opening and shutting by the time you're through Calibration," Alf said.

"I don't think I can do that," Jon said, worried.

"You'll never do it if you keep all tensed up like that," Alf said. "Just let go, let everything go, and let it happen. Feel it better?"

"Some," Jon said. "But I don't feel the valves. All I feel is it thumping."

"You'll learn. Spend some time in an orbit, or on a point-oh-oh-two-G training-asteroid, and get rid of some of those tight muscles, and you'll start being aware of all

sorts of things you never would have noticed at all on earth. Anyway, that's one of the ways it feels different to be Calibrated."

"Is that all there is to it? Just feeling around inside of yourself?"

"Gosh, no!" Alf laughed. "That's just stuff you pick up along the way. No, Calibration is something different. You get — hold it, we go into another orbit in a couple of seconds."

Alf relaxed again, this time keeping his eyes on the screen. After a pause of perhaps two seconds, the stars began to shift across it. The moon slid off the edge.

"Rotating the ship," Alf said. "Now we change our velocity-vector."

His fingers flexed, and this time Jon felt the thrust. It was in the same apparent direction as the first one, but very small.

"Thirty-point-two milli-Gs," Alf commented. "Remember how it feels."

Jon dutifully noted how hard his back was pressing against the seat, telling himself to remember just how hard it was pushing.

The tiny acceleration continued for a long time, over an hour and a half, and all that time Alf sat perfectly relaxed, his eyes resting unmoving on the screen. After a time he seemed to be a part of the room, part of the ship, as though he had melted into the contour-seat and extended his being beyond his eyes into the screen, beyond his fingertips into the very electronic control-circuits themselves. He had no need for clocks, for the timing-circuits in his brain, synchronized with the molecular resonances of his chemical constituents, were more accurate; he did not need the banks of accelerometers, velocity-integrators, centrifugal indicators, and the rest of the maze of dials and scope-faces that used to cram the control-room of every spatial craft — his whole body was a finely sensitive instrument that would tell him more, and more quickly and accurately, than the most complex of the ancient control-boards could have. He possessed a kind of extra-sensory awareness of his nerve-endings, and while the neural pathways were clumsily shoving their messages along the circuits used for ordinary body-cybernetics, he began and terminated hundreds of computations based on the very physico-chemical state of the nerve-endings themselves. Most of the data upon which he operated was far too low-level ever to break down the potential barriers of the neurons and initiate a pulse. A great deal of the time he did not use the computing-circuits of his brain at all, but worked with the direct awareness of his cells and of the subtle *feel* of Space itself, releasing energy to his muscles through direct contact, by-passing the nor-

mal control-channels entirely.

Of course, during the time he was thus occupied, he was not entirely human, but then neither was any Calibrated Person.

Jon was completely unaware of the nature of the exacting maneuver that Alf had just completed. All he knew was that now there was a red dot — Mars — glowing a little off-center of the screen, and that Alf had shoved the acceleration up to half a G and had taken his hands off the controls.

"We're all set, Jon. Nothing to do until turnover. Are you hungry?"

"A little. Don't you have to watch out for meteors?"

"No, the ship will take care of anything dangerous that gets too friendly. Let's go talk to some of the people."

Jon was a little disappointed, because he had hoped to be able to ask a thousand questions that had crowded through his mind during the long wait, but he had forgotten most of them by now, and somehow found that he was feeling more afraid than interested. This man seemed to be so different — not the way he talked, although his voice had a quality Jon would never have identified as serenity. Not his appearance, although he moved with the sureness and grace of a cat. It was something that was the total picture of Alf, that was just not quite like any other person that Jon knew. And this subtle difference frightened him, for he felt quite sure that he could never grow up to be like that, or anywhere near it.

Suddenly, standing in the elevator, his fury at his parents boiled up again. His vision blurred with the intensity of his anger and the effort to hold it in, and he thought with the utmost ferocity, "*I'll get them, both of them! They treated me rough and made me feel wrong all the time, and they made me nervous in school, and they hated me and never loved me, and they've ruined me for Calibration and I'll never be a pilot like Alf! I'll get even!*" He did not notice Alf's sudden concerned look.

"Say, Jon," Alf said. "What do you say we take a rain-check on it this time? I just remembered that I'm supposed to go see the captain about something. Suppose I pick you up in the B-deck lounge about dinner-time. OK?"

"Sure, I'll find something to do easy," Jon said — he was actually relieved, wanting a chance to be away from Alf, but not quite admitting it to himself.

They parted at B-deck, and Jon found immediate interest in a group of B's clustered around a twenty-inch Cassegranian poked out into space through a packing-gland in the side of the ship. Alf got off in officers' country and went into the radio shack.

The commandant of the Academy of Spatial Sciences sat in his office holding a space-gram, talking to a visiphone. On the other end of the line, a third of the way around Mars, the admissions officer listened, a look of resignation on his face.

". . . so it looks as if we have another Sensitive on our hands," the commandant was saying. "Remember Alfred Cory? He was shepherding the kid on the Mare Imbrium, and he was almost decalibrated by the psi-waves the kid was throwing around by his emotions. How the hell are we going to handle him, with the size enrollment we've got this week?"

"Well, we've done it before, sir; I guess we can struggle through it again. He's got a mighty slim chance, though. I've looked up his background, and his parents were near-psychotics. He would have straightened out during B-class integration programs if he'd been an ordinary kid, but you can imagine what he must have done in response to his parents' emotional attacks, being a Sensitive. I'd say we ought to give the kid at least Basic."

"I don't know. It would be harder on him to make it all the way through Basic, though I doubt that he will, and *then* be dropped out the first week of Calibration. I'd say, give him three weeks, and if he doesn't get started re-evaluating by then, give him a flunk in a course he doesn't care much about and start him in the Standard program. He'd be good in personnel, Calibrated or not."

"Well, don't forget that he's barely ten. By the time he's through Basic, he'll be eleven and a half, and a lot more stable. I think I'll let him go as far as he can make it, if you don't object too much, sir."

"All right, Bill, I won't interfere. Keep me informed on this, will you? Special memo every now and then?"

"Sure thing. I'll talk to you some more tonight at dinner."

To Jon, the first week at the academy was one continual blur of new faces, new voices, new uncertainties. He found that most of the people in his class were at least a year older than he, and his feeling of being after all not so far away from nine years old grew stronger, and he found himself putting up more and more barriers between him and the others. As he got into the routines of classwork and study, his friends narrowed down to a handful; the rest he ignored or spoke to in a superficial banter. He concentrated from the beginning on doing well in the academy, and succeeded.

By the time the first year was two months on the way, Jon was known to his instructors and class-

mates as an oddity; a rather silent, rather aloof person, never unfriendly, but on the other hand, never friendly. He moved among the others holding his thoughts to himself, becoming more and more lonely behind his barriers.

But he did excellently in his work. Physics and mathematics held his attention with increasing fascination; astronautics, space-geology, cybernetics — all of these he soaked up as though starved for information. In the discussion-groups he had the closest contact with the others that he ever allowed; if someone were making an interesting point, or offered a new line of questioning of the instructor, Jon was instantly there with questions and suggestions to draw out the other's idea, and he listened with flattering singleness of interest. This alone was the factor that kept the others feeling at all willing to accept him as any part of the group. To Jon, however, it seemed that he was working himself deeper and deeper into a situation that he didn't like, but apparently couldn't help. He was spoken to only on technical matters; if he decided to spend a week-end exploring the planet with the gang, he was accepted without question, but he was never really invited. To the extent that he did not offer personal interest in the others, he failed to receive the personal attentions the others gave within their group. From an objective standpoint, Jon was receiving exactly precisely the manner of communication from his fellows that he offered to them — mutual interest in the subjects covered in school. Of personal liking for personal reasons, there was very little going either way between Jon and the rest.

The large size of the class and Jon's own anonymity kept the question of his relationships with his social group from the attention of his superiors; it was not until the end of the first year when the class moved to another location on Mars, that the commandant found time to review the sheaf of memos turned in by the admissions officer, read between the lines, and see that something needed to be done. He called Jon in the first day of between-terms vacation. Jon showed up precisely on the dot, looking almost, but not quite, neat.

"It's OK, Jon, relax," the commandant said. "Sit down if you want to."

"Have I done something wrong?"

"No, Jon, not a thing." The commandant picked up a handful of the memos. "I've been following your progress this year — to be frank, my attention was directed to you by Alf Cory, the man who . . ."

"I remember him."

"All right. He took a liking to you, said you were pretty young

but bright, too, asked me to keep an eye out to see if you got in any difficulties. Your admissions officer has been sending me little notes all year long — you can see them if you want to."

"Should I?"

"There's nothing very interesting in them, except a continual mention of the excellence of your work, for which I commend you. But it's not what's in these notes that made me call you in. It's what's left out."

Jon waited, knowing instantly what was going to be said, and concentrating very hard on the words in order to keep the meaning from himself.

"It's very simple," the commandant said. "In this whole year, there hasn't been any mention of your participation in any group activity worth noting, beside discussions having to do with your classwork. Now, it may be that the man who sent me these reports just didn't think I would be interested, but I suspect that that isn't so. Am I guessing right?"

"I suppose so, sir," Jon said, becoming confused as he fought back the knowledge of his own aloneness.

"You know, we pretty much cram the data into you people during Basic, Jon. There's a lot to file away in your mind, and we don't spend much time at all on personal integration. But you're eleven, now, and in just seven months you'll be up for the Calibration program, according to your own stated desires. And in Calibration it's practically *all* integration. Do you have any idea about what I'm talking about?"

"We had integration classes back in C-school, sir."

"What did they teach you?"

"Oh, mainly how to keep from getting mad, without storing it up, what to do about difficulties in schoolwork, some other stuff. It didn't do me much good, though, because my parents didn't believe in integration."

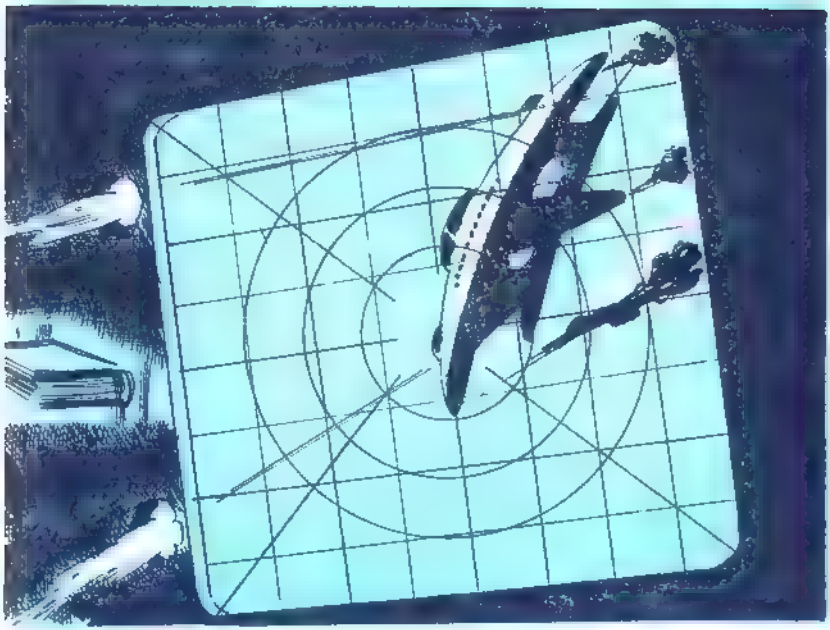
Mentally only, the commandant raised his eyebrows. "Your parents kept you from attending the integration classes?"

"No sir." Unaccountably, Jon felt irritated at the commandant, feeling that he was deliberately misunderstanding, which he was. "They let me go, all right, but — but they said everything I learned was wrong."

"Did you agree that they were right?"

"They locked me up in my room and spanked me and hollered at me until I did." Jon felt that there was something he was forgetting, that made all his statements sound foolish to the commandant, which of course was true, but the commandant wasn't pressing the point.

"I see. Well, the main idea I wanted to talk to you about was what's going on now, which is



*"Take over, Jon," Alf said, then went limp.*

something more important than what happened to you back in C-school. *You haven't got many friends, have you.*"

Something with tremendous energy surged up inside Jon instantly, so powerfully that he became dizzy with the effort of holding it in. He could not possibly have made a vocal answer to the question — the tiny relaxation necessary for speech, he knew, would release a torrent of emotion he could not stop. It was thirty seconds before he said in a rigidly controlled voice, "No sir. I've been pretty busy with my schoolwork."

The commandant, watching the play of emotions in the boy's face, did a *very* rapid bit of computing, and came up with an answer just in time to keep up the pretense that this was still just a relatively minor interrogation.

"All right, Jon. I thought you would understand what I was getting at. A bit more sociability wouldn't hurt you, you know. We aren't machines — people seem to need more than just facts and figures to keep them happy. I think you know that even better than I do."

"Yes, sir," Jon said, still controlling. "I suppose I ought to

get out more with the other guys. I'll try to remember that."

"All right. Oh, by the way . . ." the commandant got all set to push the button, and paused until he was aware that Jon was getting tense again. "You know, nobody ever gets through the fourth week of Calibration if he's hiding anything from himself or from his instructor. Seems that human beings just can't push through that final barrier as long as they've got anything hidden away in the subconscious. Ties up energy that you can't get along without. Maybe if you think about it, you'll see that this might be a useful bit of information to consider."

Jon blocked his intelligence completely on that. He heard the noises, and the sentences echoed through his head for hours after the commandant had let him go. He could not sleep that night, but lay awake going through fantasy after fantasy of ripping his parents into little pieces, of torturing them horribly, of having them declared psychotic while they shrieked in terror. Every now and then the phrase, "You haven't got many friends, have you?" popped up, and he fought down the strange bursting feeling — and then tried to relax, knowing that you can't get Calibrated if you can't relax. And then the commandant's final words about not hiding anything from oneself would fleet through his mind, and he would consider the words, puzzling over their meaning, and puzzling over why they had so little meaning. By morning his hands were trembling and his head was throbbing with a dull ache that was an almost-forgotten part of his childhood. He didn't get up for breakfast, and at 0930 he went to the transportation office and cancelled his reservation on the plane to the New Ohio observatory, and reported in at sick-call.

"I don't know, Bill," the commandant said. "He might pull out of it or he might not. I'm no Calibrated Man, and even I could pick up a little of the Psi he was radiating. He really must pack a wallop. I fed him what I could, but the minute I got anywhere near his feelings about having shut himself off from everyone, his defenses went up with a clang you could have heard in the next room. I don't know if I got through to him at all."

"Well, you must have touched something that wiggled," Bill said. "He reported in sick this morning, with a headache and a cold and chills. I hope he doesn't kill himself before he sees what he's doing to himself."

The commandant pulled his coffee-cup over in front of him and tested it with his finger. "I don't like the idea of that kid being in that shape any longer than he has to. But he's a Sensi-

tive, and I personally don't know a psychotherapist who has the vaguest idea of how to penetrate the defenses of a Sensitive. It's almost as if they know what you're going to say five seconds before you do, and just cancel out the meaning of anything that doesn't fit their own pattern of self-understanding, when they have one at all. How many Sensitives do you know who have made it through Calibration?"

"Just four or five, since the program started thirty years ago. Not many of them come here, and most of those who do back off as soon as they get a glimmer of what's coming up in the fourth week."

"Well, we can hope that Jon will do that — back out, I mean. He could reach some kind of stability in almost any uncalibrated job that doesn't call for a gregarious attitude. Some Sensitives I know of have done very well as psychotherapists, oddly enough. They seem to be able to put their sensitivity to good use in pointing out things to people, very subtly, that most often break the case. And they develop such good defenses that the worst psychopath doesn't arouse any feelings of identification at all. Well, that's beside the point. I have a feeling that our own Sensitive will fight his way clear through to Calibration, and as far through that as he can. And when he comes up against the fourth week, *I* think he'll blow sky-high or else go catatonic."

"I don't know. I seem to have a little more faith in people's basic drive to get well. I've seen a lot of people in worse positions even granting that they weren't Sensitives, who seemed to blow their tops when the crisis arrived, and then when the smoke cleared away everything was fine, and no more trouble."

"I hope you're right. As I said last year, I won't interfere. He'd be damned valuable if he did get through Calibration — that's the only thing that throws the balance in favor of letting him continue. Let's drop it for a while; I've thought about that kid for thirty-six hours, now, and that's enough."

Jon stayed in sick-bay four days and finally, after having raged internally until he was exhausted, fell asleep, slept twelve hours and pulled himself back to "normalcy." The only difference that he noticed at all was a vague feeling of puzzlement that remained fairly constant, as though there were something he had forgotten to look up, or had meant to do. He finally decided that it was something from Astrogation class and spent a few hours leafing through the book. He picked up a few bits that had escaped his notice previously, but even though he told himself he had satisfied the feeling it was still there the same as before. At length the trip to the

New Ohio observatory came to mind, so he covered up the feeling with action.

The vacation dragged on rather dully, and Jon returned to school with pronounced relief. Six more months until Calibration starts, he thought as the first class started, and the feeling of having meant to do something came up instantly. He had to try deliberately not to feel what was going on inside himself in order to pay attention to what the instructor was saying.

The six months went on and on, much as before, with only one exception. He was in a class now largely peopled with prospective trainees in Calibration, and some of the courses Jon was taking was a history of Calibration as a human achievement. Hardly a word was said about the actual processes they would be going through, and when someone finally asked what they should expect, they got a hazy answer: the instructor said, "Anything I could tell you now would be both inaccurate and useless — you'll see what I mean. I'm not just trying to give you a hard time. We have positive orders not to attempt to describe Calibration to anyone before he has entered the program. Reason: very simple. Part of Calibration depends on your not having any preconceived notions about what you'll be doing — they want you to pick up the experiences first *without* language. Makes the learning a lot faster and keeps the trainees from confusing themselves. Sorry I can't satisfy your curiosity."

Jon learned that the History of Calibration course was on the optional list, so after three weeks of it he dropped it, and signed up instead for the math course he hadn't meant to take.

His feeling-of-having-forgotten-something grew stronger as the number of days between him and Calibration dwindled. He spent hours in the library verifying data he already had accumulated, and got into the habit of double-checking all his exercises in physics and math, and anything else involving calculations. He did extra-curricular studying, completely forgetting that he had agreed to spend more time with his classmates in social pursuits. By the time the last month of Basic arrived, he was, without being aware of it, in a constantly watchful attitude, his eyes searching his surroundings as though watching for someone he was to meet, sitting tensely on the edge of his chair until class was dismissed, and then almost running outside, only to wander aimlessly until the beginning of the next class. He managed to keep his work at the same level of perfection as before, but only with a tremendous expenditure of energy. He took to going to bed as soon as his studying was over and dropping into

unconsciousness rather than sleep, awakening only with a great effort of will.

Then the preliminary training ended. Eighteen long months lay behind Jon, and the little mental filing system he had brought along from C-school was practically lost in the complex maze of information he had accumulated in a sixth of his former schooling-time. He carried in his mind not more than a minimum of quantitative data; the main part of his newly acquired knowledge was concerned with *relationships.* Formulas, equations, statements, experimentation, all of which demonstrated and described a thousand different basic aspects of the physical universe — the interrelationships, actually, between human perception and logic and the motions and energies of the vast unknowable Outsideness in which Man finds himself immersed.

And of course, all this "knowledge" would be useless until it was made truly meaningful in the Calibration program, the program which had changed Man's scientific endeavors from the blind fumblings of malfunctioning men distrustful of their own senses into a vital and living part of human growth.

"And now," thought Jon, on the last day of class, in a brief flash of half-understanding, "I am going to find out what is wrong with me."

He was frightened. It had been many years since he had allowed himself to feel that emotion, much less label it correctly.

He stood in feather-light vacuum gear in the midst of a group of ten others. His feet barely contacted the smooth rock beneath him; the landscaped training-asteroid was no more than three miles in radius, and his weight was less than a thousandth of earth-normal. They had been warned not to try any vigorous jumping if they wanted to be present for the whole lecture.

This was the first day of Calibration, and the instructor was apparently going to teach them how to play baseball. He stood on a small boulder, at the foot of which was a small pile of round black objects like the one the instructor held in his hand.

Jon listened with desperate intentness to his helmet-radio, and felt fear. He was afraid because he was suddenly aware of how much he had changed. Where he had had some difficulty putting his hand on his chest back on the Mare Imbrium, he now could scarcely control his movements at all. The absence of significant gravity left him with the awareness that he was a mass of tight muscles; his chest and stomach were hard knots; his back-muscles were trying to pull him into a reverse arch, their strength having increased from his habitual

half-bent posture that he had developed at the academy. His legs were stiff and unmanageable from the constant effort to walk sedately so as not to show his agitation. All the tiny tensions that made up his "glass wall" were inescapably in his awareness — and he found that they were increasing as he tried to control his bodily position and his movements.

The instructor carefully lifted the little ball up to where they could see it.

"On earth," his voice said tinnily in the helmet-speaker, "this is a one-point-zero-zero-zero-kilogram mass of ordinary iron. From now on, we will not consider it to have any weight at all. It is a hunk of matter with a certain mass. You can feel the mass any time you want to either by accelerating it, or by keeping it from accelerating in a gravitational field or in a magnetic field. When you are familiar with the concept of mass as a sensation inside your own bodies, you can make use of the feeling."

He moved one foot slightly, and then without warning, threw the iron ball over their heads. The group turned as one and watched it sail out of sight.

"I'll tell you more about that later," the instructor said. "Whoops, there goes our first one!"

Jon, when he had turned to watch the ball, had made too violent a movement, and in a spasmodic try to keep control, had shoved downward with both legs. He was now a good sixty feet up, still rising gracefully. Nobody laughed.

"Who is it?" the instructor asked. "That you, Jon?"

"Yes, sir," Jon said in a low voice, burning with embarrassment.

"Tell the gang how it happened so they'll know what not to do." The instructor's voice carried nothing but interest, and Jon felt somewhat better.

"Well, I was turning to watch the ball, and I guess I moved too fast, and when I tried to keep my balance I overcorrected, and — well — here I am. I-I won't — what's escape velocity here?"

"You can't jump off this base, Jon," the instructor said. "You'll be back with us in about three minutes. You've got a little horizontal component, so keep track of us. Now, let's all get one of the iron balls — step up and grab one."

Jon was spinning slowly, so he had to keep twisting his neck to see where the group was. He had to fight a feeling of complete failure.

He landed head-down, on his outstretched hands. He was horizon-down on the group, but he knew where they were, and carefully started a series of long gliding hops. By the time he got back a

few minutes later, he had discovered that by keeping his legs together and operating them as a single rigid unit he could kangaroo-hop with a fair degree of control. He came up with the others and got a ball while the instructor was pointing out the low cliff half a mile away that they were to try to hit.

"Remember, you don't have to loft the ball very much, and you don't have to throw it very hard. Don't be fooled by the inertia; there's not much acceleration toward the ground here."

"Don't I know it," Jon said ruefully, but still nobody laughed.

"Let's throw one at a time. Watch what the other fellow is doing, and try not to make the same mistakes. How about by bunk-number?"

Jon was third, so he watched carefully. The first boy, Carl Andrews, wound up and gave his ball a terrific heave, which started out all right but ended with the ball ploughing into the ground thirty feet away and Carl bouncing off his back in slow motion.

Pete Andrews was next; he took careful aim and sent the ball in a straight line toward the cliff, stopping his backward drift with a backward thrust of his foot as practiced as the instructor's previous demonstration. His ball hit the ground at the foot of the cliff.

Jon's try was too halting, and he threw the ball much more slowly than he had intended, so that his throw rolled to an ignominious stop no more than seventy-five feet away.

All the rest had caught on by that time, and they threw in rapid succession, half-a-dozen of them actually hitting the cliff, the rest overcorrecting for fear of losing the missile by throwing it too high, on out into space. They spent the rest of the "day" throwing ball after ball at the cliff, loping over to retrieve them, and throwing some more, each time being encouraged to feel what their muscles were doing as they imparted velocity to the ball. Finally the pickup-ship appeared overhead; the instructor said, "All right, everybody, *jump!*"

The group rose in a straggly cloud, and the pickup-ship jockeyed about scooping them in.

That night there wasn't much talk in the barracks. Each trainee was thinking about this first day of Calibration, trying to guess what the object of it was, how it could lead to something else. No one was trying harder than Jon. He lay awake late, still trying to discover what to do about the knots in his arms and legs — the training-barracks had 0.1-earth gravity which was still slight enough to leave Jon quite aware of his physical tie-ups. Under these conditions the feeling of

having forgotten something was stronger than ever, and was beginning to show up as a tight band around his chest, and he kept wanting to strain and struggle and burst free, but didn't dare go through any contortions in the barracks.

The next day they arrived at the same area on the training planetoid some hours earlier than the day before, and the first thing that happened was that they got an idea of what it meant to be Calibrated.

"Remember what I was saying about throwing balls yesterday?" the instructor said, perched once again on his rocky podium. "Well, as you now know, one doesn't just *throw* a ball — you don't have to think of it so generally. Now, yesterday, I gave a ball with a definite mass a definite, known velocity in a predetermined direction. As you will now observe, this can be done with a certain degree of accuracy."

Whereupon he turned around, and while the group watched goggle-eyed, jumped a foot into space and snagged an iron ball as it sailed by.

The instructor turned calmly to face the group. "Now, you'll see that there were a few things I didn't take into account, as the ball didn't return exactly to the point from which I threw it. In spite of the landscaping that was done on this body, it's not perfectly symmetrical. Also, you'll remember that although we've stopped the rotation of the body we're on, it still is in an orbit around the sun, and it is subject to slight perturbations from neighboring planets — in this case, those perturbations are just about negligible, but you'll run into cases where they are definitely *not* negligible, particularly when you are dealing with a system of two or more bodies."

The day's "lesson" proceeded from there; this time the trainees were given the apparently simple assignment of jumping high above the ground so as to simulate no-gravity conditions, and then of setting two of the little iron balls into orbits about their common center of gravity, the balls having been magnetized to augment their feeble gravitational fields.

The next day the task was to construct various orbits of specified eccentricities, and from then on life became a series of mental and physical exercises, one blending into the next, each demanding the utmost delicacy and concentration.

After the second week, the group moved to another training-asteroid, this time a two-body system. Each body was again roughly three miles in radius, and they rotated around each other with no more than two miles separating their surfaces. The

next week was occupied with first projecting more little spheres in S-orbits, and then in the trainees projecting themselves from one body to the other in specific S-orbits, tangential orbits, and straight-line orbits.

This initial three-week period was involved with exercises that were deliberately designed to require the maximum of attention — thus taking attention off another phenomenon that was taking place, most markedly in Jon; intensification of errors in physical function.

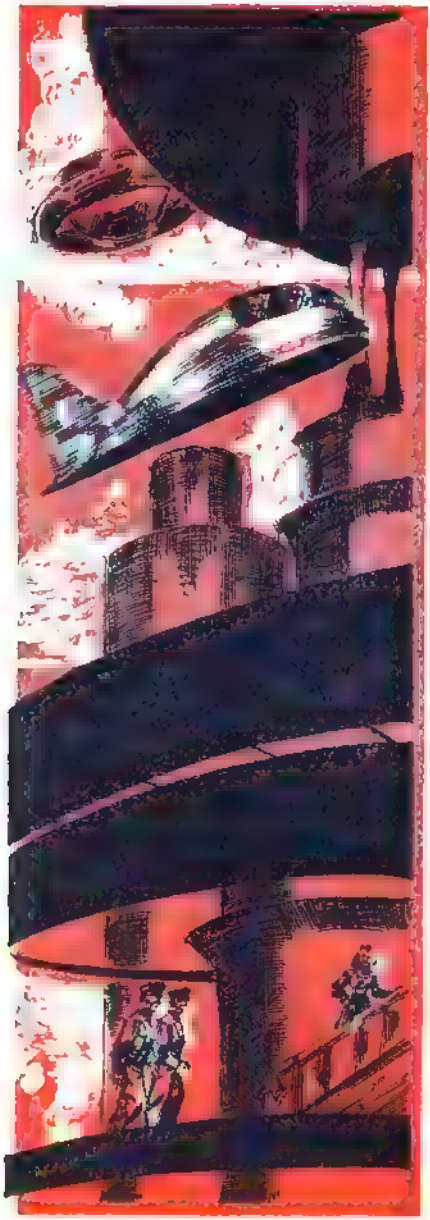
Despite the advancement of psychotherapy and its high degree of acceptance as a part of ordinary living, most Calibration trainees came into the program loaded with little physical tensions. Each tiny muscle-fiber that was in a permanent state of contraction was that way as a result of a whole mind-body self-contradiction. This had to be so, for without opposition from the same muscular system, any muscular pull would result in either a motion on the part of a limb, or a distortion of the body, as long as there was no gravity to fight. In order to appear reasonably stable, therefore, having these tensions had to set up a whole set of counter-tensions, which under earth-gravity conditions were seldom noticed.

Most important was the fact that motivating each of the tensions and counter-tensions was a whole system of *thinking* — thinking that contradicted itself. Desires half-felt and denied, the tensions of past fears that were never satisfactorily resolved, armor against the opinions of a still-far-from-perfect social system. The normal human being who entered Calibration was just not *quite* sure he was going to survive, and consequently was always somewhat ready to stop any motion he entered into. As a matter of fact, the normal person moved habitually by pushing harder than his tensions pushed back.

A person who was in this "normal" condition obviously could never have all of his attention available for a single-minded approach to the task of developing the senses that had lain dormant all his life, nor could he feel free to drop his physical defenses long enough to experiment with his mind-body system as a single, coordinated instrument.

Jon was learning the skills he was asked to learn, but he was doing it by a system of pitting tension against tension. He was stiff and unpliable, losing the fineness of control that he was trying to develop, and he knew it. Then the fourth week began.

Assembled in the barracks, each trainee standing by his duffel-bag, the group listened while their instructor gave them their



*The two-ton air cab whirled aloft, and Jon relaxed to watch the city pass swiftly below*

next assignments.

"You're all through with me, now," he said. "You've had a chance to get the feel of the space-time continuum you live in, under specially-prepared conditions. You all probably realize that the program you have just completed has been entirely preliminary, that you have not developed the degree of skill and awareness required for Calibration. What you have gone through so far has had but one purpose — to give each of you a good idea of what stands in the way of your Calibration. By now all of you, presumably, have noticed many difficulties that came up only because you could not control your own bodies well enough, even though you understood the principles adequately. Some of you have had, of course, more difficulty than others." He looked frankly at Jon.

"I can't promise success to any of you, but I will say that what happens to you next week is strictly up to you, and doesn't depend in the least on the present condition you find yourself in."

Jon thought, incredulous, "They never had anybody like *me* here before. . . ."

"You're going to be sent to another base, now — you'll have the first forty-eight hours to

yourself, in a room of your own. It's hoped that you'll spend this time reviewing your difficulties, defining to yourselves just what the problem is and what you think you have to do about it. After that you'll have an individual instructor, and what happens from then on in is strictly *ad lib*."

Then he looked down at the sheet of paper in his hand and read off their transportation assignments. The destination was not mentioned, and nobody asked; when the list had been completely read, the group of boys and girls picked up their duffel-bags and shuffled off in speculative silence.

*Something's wrong.*

Jon had never felt that feeling so strongly as he did the instant he stepped into the patrol-craft he had drawn. The three others, all boys, who were to travel with him were already in their acceleration-chairs. As he stowed his bag in the locker aft, Jon searched his mind with a queer feeling of urgency. He could almost get a physical sensation from the atmosphere within the patrol-craft, a sort of odd, *dead* feeling. Jon had the sudden idea that he did not want to go on this trip; he fought it back and strapped into his chair.

The ship rocked slightly in its cradle as the pilot climbed up the ladder at the bow and slid into his compartment; in a moment the sound of the warmup jet hissed softly behind them. Half a minute later the voice-box cackled, "Takeoff, ten seconds."

Ships as small as these five-man patrol craft could not carry the heavy inertia-nullifying gear, so at takeoff Jon was mashed into his own chair. The brutal acceleration went on and on, far longer than Jon had anticipated. *How far are we going?* he wondered.

It was a good hour before the acceleration lessened to around one G, and the intercom sounded.

"You can unstrap now if you want to. We'll go on like this for some time; I'll be aft in a few minutes."

Jon unstrapped and swung his arms and legs around to get the cramps out of them. He saw that the other three were the two Andrews brothers and an older boy named Krank; in a moment he saw that the pilot was Alf.

Instead of surprise he again felt the intense awareness of something terribly wrong; he stammered out a hello, and rather abstractedly introduced Alf to the other passengers.

"All us Calibrated Peons have to spend a few days every month helping out in the program," Alf was saying, "and since I'd met Jon before I thought I'd like to ferry this ship across. Got any idea where we're headed?"

They all shook their heads.

"Small wonder. This base is a long way outside the System — beyond Pluto — and it's a pretty well-guarded secret. If any of you decide to conk out during the next week, you'll have the memory of this trip hypnotically removed, and some fantasy or other injected in its place." Casually, Alf reached over and switched on the observer's visiplate; in a few seconds the image steadied into a field of stars.

"Why is it such a big secret?" Peter Andrews asked. "I don't know who they'd have to keep it a secret *from!*"

"A lot of reasons," Alf said. "In the first place, things go on out at Rim Base — that's what it's called — that are better to keep from public knowledge. Most people still aren't well-enough integrated to stay reasonable in the face of some of the data we've accumulated. But there's another reason, one that's about the best-guarded secret in the system. The system is under observation."

That drew four blank stares.

"What I mean is fairly simple. A race from another stellar system, how far away we don't know yet, has been prowling around the outskirts of our planetary system for some four years, now. Remember the stories the asteroid engineers were bringing back not so long ago? How people were taking to disappearing for no apparent reason?"

"My uncle told me about something like that," Jon said.

"We've found that these critters are picking them up. Last year we caught an SOS in time to catch them red-handed. And eight months ago they started going after Calibrated people."

The sense of *wrongness* deepened in Jon, and he watched the reactions on the faces of the other trainees; alarm from Krank, excitement on the part of the Andrews'.

"Beside the fact that we want to save time," Alf went on, "we have another good reason for high-tailing it, as you can see. If these strangers are interested in making trouble, the System is going to depend pretty strongly on the skills of Calibrated people to defend it. There's no more Army and Navy, so any defense will have to be carried out with police-patrol craft like this one, and with whatever heavier craft we can get built in time. That's one of the projects out at Rim Base. Naturally, we don't want this news to get spread around the System if we can help it — it's better that the raiders think we don't know who they are. As near as we can tell, they think we're attributing the disappearances to a crime wave."

"Alf . . ." Jon began, then trailed off as he realized he could not phrase the questioning feeling that permeated him, the doubt of

*something* — no, not doubt; just that . . . he couldn't say what it was, even to himself. Maybe it was . . . *certainty* suddenly was cut short.

"Beside the fact that we want to save time," Alf was saying, "we have another good reason for our hurry, as you can see. We don't know for sure if our visitors are just curious, or if they're aggressive. If they attack, our only defense will be Calibrated people running police-patrol ships like this one, plus what larger ships we can get built in time — they're building a couple big ships in an underground factory hidden on Luna someplace. We don't want too many people aware of this right away — it would be better, in the shape we're in, to let any potential attackers think we're unprepared."

Jon felt unaccountably puzzled by something, but the feeling of *wrongness* seemed to have abated. He almost remembered Alf saying something a little silly, but he couldn't place what it was.

"What'll we do if they get *us*?" Krank was almost whimpering, and Jon looked at him in surprise, then realizing almost immediately that he, too, was a little scared.

He was about to say something to Krank, when Peter Andrews said, "Want somebody to hold your hand and tell you everything will be all right, Krank?"

Krank grinned shamefacedly, and Jon felt that his own face was turning red — he had been about to sympathize with Krank and tell him it would be all right!

"Chances are excellent that we won't come within a light-hour of any of their ships," Alf said. "And to catch us now, they'd have to have spotted us a long time ago to match velocities before we're too close to Rim Base."

The period at the end of his sentence was punctuated by a sharp buzz from the meteor-detector.

"Acceleration chairs!" Alf shouted, and pointed at the viewplate as he scurried forward. "Look!"

Krank screamed. "It's them, it's them!"

"Get him in his chair, you two — Jon, you come up forward with me."

Fifteen seconds later the ship lurched roughly to the side as Alf rammed the quartering jets wide open. Jon had to hang on with both hands to keep from sliding out of his chair; he hadn't finished strapping in.

"Looks like they want us," Alf said grimly. "Keep their ship in the viewplate, will you, Jon?"

Jon struggled and got one strap fastened, and then grabbed with leaden arms at the *manual* knobs to the side of the viewplate. The other ship, still a shapeless speck, swam jerkily to the center of the plate, then fell off the screen,

wavered back on, as the ship shuddered off in another direction and Jon cranked madly at the knobs.

"We can't go to Rim Base," Alf said. "We'll have to try to make Callisto, and that's a long, long way off!"

"How do you know it's them?" Jon gasped.

"Smell the air."

Jon noticed for the first time a pungent odor faintly reaching his nostrils. For a moment he puzzled, then "Ozone!"

"They're shooting at us," Alf said. "Trying to bollix up something in the ship, I'd say. I don't think they'd use anything lethal, unless they think we've identified them — that might be it."

Again, the feeling of wrongness, this time sudden and sharp, and right on the heels of it, a burst of understanding that died even as it came to Jon's awareness . . .

"They're shooting at us," Alf said. "I guess they didn't want to be detected." He slammed the quartering jets off and opened up the main drive-jets. "Whatever they're using ionizes air," he said, laboring to speak against the pressure of acceleration.

Jon, his muscles rigid, got the ship back into the screen again and fell heavily back into his chair, half-knocking the wind out of his lungs as the ship's acceleration brought the pads slamming into his back.

"Gaining," Alf said a few moments later. "We may have to fight it out. Not much chance."

Finally he cut the acceleration, "I'll kill us off with G's before they lay a glove on us," he muttered. "Get everyone into space-gear!" he shouted at the intercom — feeble stirring-sounds came from in the rear, and Jon looked around, located vacuum-gear hanging in webbing against one bulkhead. He slipped his on, finding it much too large, but useable, and Alf slid into his with a single practiced movement.

"Now they can't stop us by holing us," Alf said. "God, what a monster!" He was referring to the other ship, which had grown to sizeable proportions in the viewplate. It was grey and sleek, and had transparent bubbles growing out of the sides of its bow. As Jon watched, a thin line of violet streaked toward them; a sudden blast of heat made Jon look up, to see a red-hot glowing patch on the metal overhead gradually fading.

Alf threw the ship around in crazy gyrations, and Jon made no attempt to try to keep them in the visiplate. He was getting dizzy and feeling more and more afraid and helpless. He wished in rapid, jerky thoughts, that he was Calibrated so he could help Alf somehow, and in fear and rage cursed his parents in silent, deadly hatred. Then they got Alf.

Jon looked, incredulous, at the smoking gap in Alf's vacuum-gear, and the unpleasant mess that showed through. His stomach churned.

"Take over, Jon." Alf's voice came in a whisper over the helmet radio. "Do what you can, pal." The whistle of escaping air moaned in a dying wail as Alf went limp. Jon kept his eyes off Alf then, knowing what happens to people when the external air-pressure drops to nothing. He could not avoid the wet sounds that came through the helmet-speaker, and held on rigidly to his self-control until the air was too thin to carry sound any more.

Tentatively, he curled his right hand over the control-knob set into the arm of his chair, and shoved. The ship responded with a slight increase in acceleration, and Jon recklessly jammed it forward to its limit, wishing that the visiplate was automatic-tracking. . . . Again, something wrong. Again, the beginning of a flash of something, and . . . revision.

In the visiplate, he could see the other ship — the octant-indicator showed it was above, behind, to the left of Jon. Another needle licked out, and Jon wrenched at the knob, nearly snapping his head off his shoulders; the beam flicked in a slender column across the field of vision; Jon could almost hear it sizzle.

The fear left him and was replaced by a growing rage. There was no grief over the loss of Alf, only a single-minded, deadly hatred of the aliens who had impersonally killed him. The incredible unfairness of it, the unfairness of a whole universe where one could lose what little he had in a single moment. . . .

Jon released the pressure on the control, and became aware that there was a salt taste of blood in his mouth. Too many G's too long. As the haze departed from his brain, he found the quartering jets and spun the ship around so it faced the other ship. Then he began to play with the quartering-jets and the main jet, making the ship dance and hop erratically.

All his attention was on learning, *fast* and *right*. He deliberately tried to imitate Alf's attitude at the controls, trying to melt into them; the erratic hops became less erratic and more controlled.

More of the violet needles licked by, missing the shuddering patrol-craft. Jon snatched with one hand at his straps, yanking them tighter, and then, his eyes fastened on the screen, jammed the main-drive control home. The image of the other ship loomed startlingly large, then obliterated the stars; there was a flash of dull-gleaming metal and a wrenching crash, and the little ship was in the clear. In the screen the huge alien ship was beginning to turn, and Jon saw with satisfaction that one of the

gun-bubbles was missing. He swung the ship to head again in the general direction of Callisto, and used as much acceleration as he thought they could stand until the other ship caught up again.

And while they were fleeing and ozone crackled in his nose, Jon *relaxed*. He had something to do.

Feel your heart beating. Feel the valves opening and shutting. Opening and . . . there! No, not quite, relax more . . . open, shut, faster *than I thought! OK.*

*Now . . . What do I need? Awareness; what first? Muscles. No, nerves. No, muscles. Muscles.*

*Arms, shoulders, neck — way, way too tight. OK, pal, let go, let go now if you're ever going to — if I'm ever going to . . .*

*Back, ouch! And abdomen, and chest, and legs. Let 'em go. Now.*

Electric tingles raced through his body as he rode with the force of sheer desire through a thousand defensive neural networks controlling his muscles, breaking up the old combinations with the surging energy he suddenly found available deep inside himself. To the shudderings and twitches, the waves of panic, the roaring in his head that resulted from this, he paid no attention at all. A hundred desperate voices inside him shrieked at him to stop; these, too, he ignored.

Now, very gently, he let the storm slow and cease, and sent his awareness to his fingertips, his toes, through tiny fibres everywhere inside him.

*They're mine, now, all of them. Now — the rest.*

Not heeding the terror, he let his awareness *expand*. He needed no instructions; he suddenly understood that he had known how to do this all the time, but just . . . *wouldn't*. All the terror and hate and self-despisement of a lifetime lay just outside his little sphere, and if he wanted ever to use his whole brain, he knew he had to reverse the "shrinking" that had been going on all his life long, and expand again to occupy *all* of himself. Halfway through the process, he saw that the other ship was getting too close.

"He almost did it," one observer said. "Looks like he's ducking out of it at the last minute."

"I'm not so sure — maybe he needs to try it. Watch," the other observer said.

His ship was holed again and again, but each time the coruscating needles missed Jon, and, he hoped, the others, of whom he thought suddenly for the first time.

It was easier this time. Now he could really *feel* the ship as it responded, know at any instant the exact velocity he had, the exact acceleration that was changing his velocity. This time he took off another bubble with his quar-

tering jets, avoiding further damage to his own ship; then he was off again, dancing and dodging the violet beams; his skill was increasing so rapidly that he was holed but once more.

He thought once again of his passengers as the ship, out of range of the alien's guns, streaked with steady acceleration straight away from the sun. He loosened his straps, intending to check on them, when he caught sight of Alf's body.

Rather coldly now, he examined what had been the human being he had first felt any kinship with. Not Alf any more, really. Yet it had been, once, no more than half an hour ago. . . . Jon tightened up his straps again and relaxed.

*Expand. Find the ganglia, the pathways, find the shut-off parts, the parts that are asleep, turn 'em on, wake 'em up.*

A curious feeling of lightness began to pervade him, and he seemed to be perceiving more and more sharply. The faint smell of ozone was more distinct, now, the sensations pouring into his body through all his sense-channels seemed more clear-cut, more finely differentiated.

And his brain!

*Have I really been getting along in this little CORNER?*

And very quickly, he ran into something that quivered and vanished like a ghost, and he knew what it was that was so *wrong*.

Even though he expected it, he felt a little startled when he looked at the chair next to him and saw that it was empty. And as he watched, the image of the other ship on the visiplate flickered a few times and finally blinked out, leaving the screen grey and blank. He knew that if he went aft, he would find no one there.

When the little ghost vanished from his mind, he remembered the movie, the one he had seen when he was no more than seven. All about pirates and the Space Patrol. An alien ship, grey and sleek, firing deadly rays, kidnapping and plundering until stopped by Junior Cadet Somebody. A movie.

Jon groped for an explanation. A joke? *Not from this end*, he thought. Although the ghost had vanished, he could still feel very distinctly the exact state of tension of the muscles that pulled his toes against the soles of his boots to balance him. He felt quite clearly the sluggish peristaltic movements in his intestines and the push-pull in his diaphragm. And he could *think!*

In a flash of understanding, almost as an afterthought so brief, concise, and pat it was, he understood the pattern of his life, of his pyramiding mistakes, of the control over himself that he had given away to the people and

things in his environment, through blaming and blaming at every opportunity. Almost casually, he dismissed everything he had been up until now as irrelevant.

No, no joke. That left only one possibility. And as he thought of it, he *knew* precisely the truth.

There never had been anyone aboard but himself — aboard this training ship, this Calibration-machine. It never went anywhere. The moment he had stepped into it, the machine, or somebody running it, had lifted his expectations neatly out of his mind, changed them ever so slightly so as not to jar him, and fed them back, somehow, as concrete perceptions. And Jon was now aware of something more about himself.

The initial feeling of *wrongness* — it had come from the fact that although there were people in the ship, supposedly, *he felt nothing from them:* They just didn't *feel* like live people.

And in exploring this feeling, Jon became aware that there was someone outside the ship now. *He felt him approaching.*

And of course, the revisions. The several times that he had been about to recognize some of the conversation as being taken from his memories of space-operas, the recognition had to be blanked out and the sound-track played over again somewhat differently.

"You've got it all right, Jon." A voice spoke cheerily in his mind. "And the rest follows."

"Alf?"

"Yeah, with no gooey holes." A mental shudder was transmitted. "You kids have the damndest imaginations. Your first guess was right. It's a machine. All it does is pick some nice little threat to your survival and present you with it, at the same time creating a situation out of your own memories that contains your highest motivation to solve the situation. Doesn't work on everybody. Only on the ones who are highly enough motivated and have worked themselves to a certain mental state where they decide they can't live through it, or carry out their purpose, without changing *themselves.* The ones who just blast away generally blow their tops and that's the end of Calibration for them."

"Should I come out, now? Or are you coming in?"

"Oh, that's not me outside the ship. That's your instructor. I'm busy right now landing the old Mare Imbrium at Logan Downs.

"But that's on Venus!"

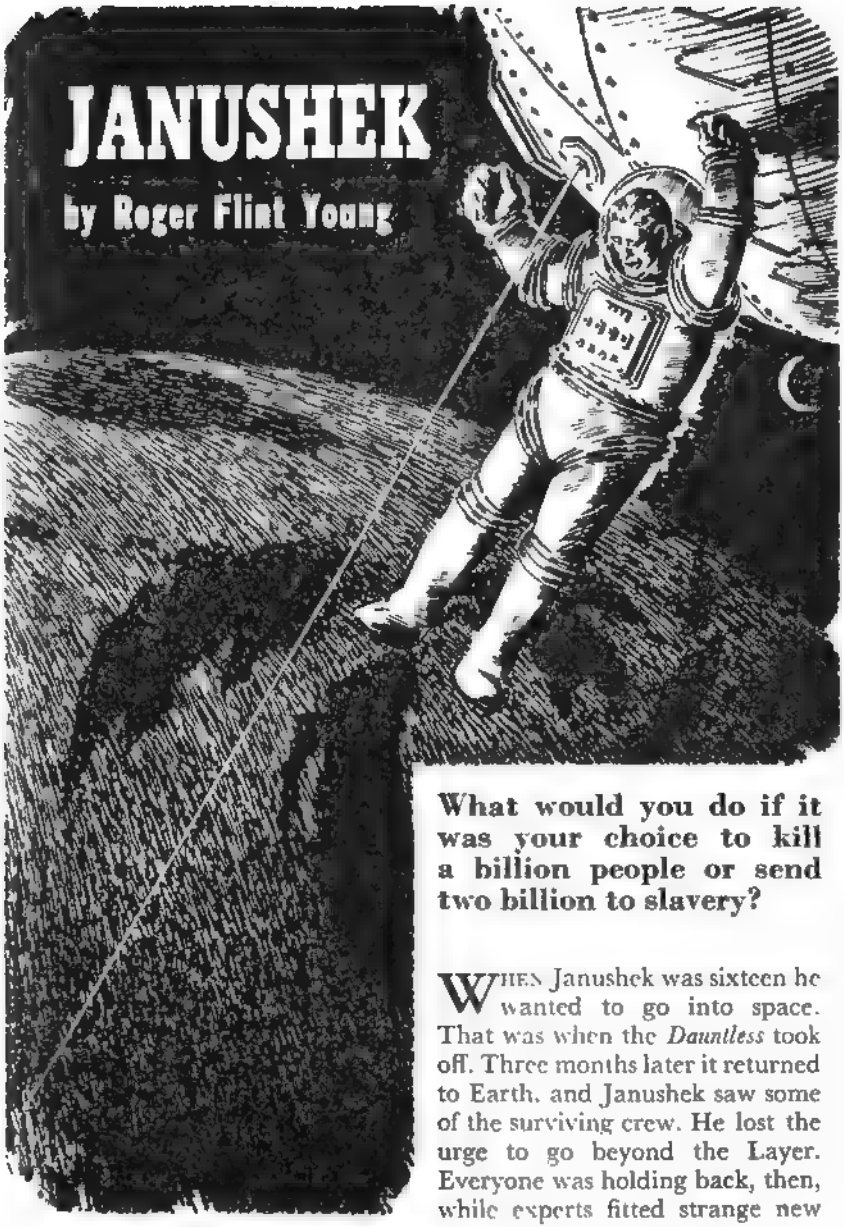
"I have an amplifier."

Jon accepted that temporarily, but as he stepped out of the air-lock of the "ship" and walked toward his grinning instructor, he wondered.

Calibration seemed to be slightly different from what he had expected.

# JANUSHEK

by Roger Flint Young



**What would you do if it was your choice to kill a billion people or send two billion to slavery?**

WHEN Janushek was sixteen he wanted to go into space. That was when the *Dauntless* took off. Three months later it returned to Earth, and Janushek saw some of the surviving crew. He lost the urge to go beyond the Layer. Everyone was holding back, then, while experts fitted strange new

radiations into the known spectrum bands.

Janushek went into Service when seventeen. He was nineteen when they started forming guardian crews and he was one of the first selected for the new branch.

There he was: An average serviceman of the time who became an average Guardian. He wasn't smart or brave. Sometimes he was stupid, and he got scared as much as the next man, or even a little more so. No one ever gave him an important responsibility, or much of any responsibility for that matter, and he never wanted any.

Yet, when the important thing came along he took it on himself because he thought that was the way it had to be.

The yeoman came into the supply ship control cabin, still stooping from his trip through the low-ceilinged supply rooms tunnel. He jerked his head at the sergeant.

"All supplies transferred to the Guardian, mister."

The small, dried-looking sergeant with the sleeve-full of hashmarks started a smile that was tight-lipped into nothingness.

"Fuel?" He snapped it out nervously. "Water? Rations? Special orders? Spare parts?" He rattled off whatever he could think of, not waiting for answers.

The yeoman grunted, smiled. "Take it easy, Danny. Everything's on board."

"Sorry. Sure, I know." The sergeant bobbed his head, turned toward the corporal. "Steve, are the personnel locks secure?"

"Secure, Danny."

The sergeant bobbed his head again, looked at the tall young man beside him.

"It's all yours, Janushek. In you go! You're on your way to the high sky!"

Guardian 2nd Class Janushek stretched out his hand, shook briefly with the sergeant.

The corporal spun the big wheel in the wall mounting. Janushek stood at the base of the personnel shaft, looking up into it. He heard the *hiss* of air as the seal broke, saw the hinged plate dropping into the shaft.

"Open, corporal." Janushek said it without turning, heard the corporal repeat into the communicator. An instant later he saw the crescent moon of light above, started climbing the rungs as it filled.

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen — He was out of the supply ship, then, and in the tube between it and the Guardian.

Thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two —

He hurried the last few rungs, drew himself past the entry-port of the Guardian, swung himself to the side and felt the deck beneath his feet.

"Replacements in and clear." Janushek called it out even before

he looked around the portroom.

"The devil! Where are the rest of them?"

Janushek turned, faced the red-complexioned, burly little man with the Guardian 1st Class stripes. He gave a casual salute before answering.

"I'm the rest of them, chief . . . Janushek's the name."

"Janushek, eh?" The burly man grunted. "I'm Jack Fast. What's the deal?"

Janushek shrugged. "I'm your replacement."

"I've got that by now, all right. I'm supposed to send three men down, get three replacements." We waved at the three men who stood by the port, waiting to descend to the hovering supply ship. Then he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "All right. I get one replacement, I send three men down."

The three waiting beside the port needed no further encouragement. In a few seconds the last of them was out of sight. A minute passed. Then: "Supply ship sealed." It was the corporal's voice from the speaker on the wall.

Fast went to the control wheel, spun it rapidly, then picked up the phone. "Guardian sealed."

"Breaking away."

"Break it."

Janushek imagined he could feel the supply ship as it dropped away from beneath them, knew he couldn't. Fast turned back to him.

"How much are they cutting?" There was a deep anger in his face.

"Don't know. The whole Service is taking a beating. Economy and stuff and elections coming up. The way I hear it, they're going easy on the Guardians."

"Easy?"

Janushek grinned. "Sort of. Everyone knows we don't need six men on one of these ships."

"Need them *how?*" Fast wanted to know. "Sure, it doesn't take six men to run one. Two could do that, if they had to. But when you're floating around twenty-seven miles above Earth it's a case of — a case of —"

"I know. The more the merrier."

"Yeah." Fast's anger dropped to be replaced by a heavy glumness. "Well, it's not your fault. Let's get up to living quarters."

"Right." Janushek followed Fast out of the portroom, turned in the passageway to seal the portroom door behind him. He didn't hurry to catch Fast, already out of sight. These ships were all the same; know one and you knew them all.

Fast was in the big lounge that ran the length of the Guardian's center section. The other two Guardian crewmen were there, listening as Fast told, in terse and descriptive terms, the new arrangements on replacements. Janushek had known they would be

here, awake. Even if off-duty, the entire crew of a Guardian was always awake at replacement time. Change-over-fever; something that wouldn't let you sleep.

Guardian 3rd Class Wendell, not long out of school Janushek thought as he shook hands. Nice looking young fellow; blond hair cut short to keep the waves and curls from showing. Probably filled to the brim with the old Guardian spirit.

Guardian 3rd Class Christen wasn't like that. He was short and swarthy, stocky; gripped hard when he shook hands, and looked willing to take any drink or bet.

"I'm going up to Controls," Fast announced. "You fellows do whatever you want to."

"I'll go along." Janushek started to trail the chief.

"No. No, I can manage. No sense crowding yourself 'till you have to."

Janushek turned back. He saw Christen look at him.

"I was thinking of the control cabin . . . I guess you know why they're so jammed?"

Janushek shook his head. "No . . . I've wondered." He found a deep leather chair to his liking, arranged himself comfortably. Wendell dropped into one near him. Christen stood, watching Janushek.

"Well, they were designed just large enough to house the equipment needed to float the Guardians. Two walls were filled with needles, dials and indicators. One wall was filled with automatic compensating computators to keep the ship in place in the magnetic field, and the manuals. The other wall held the overflow items, and, of course, the door that goes to the rest of the ship.

"I remember the way they had it on the first Guardian. It was cozy, but a fellow had room to turn around.

"Then came the scientists. Radiation men, meteorologists, astronomers, aviation experts, photographic experts, electrical and radio men, physicists, bacteriologists, geologists, vacuum men, cartographers — And more. They all came. Every last one of them with some special job which the Guardians should be doing for the good of somebody or other.

"Most of them got their way. All their pet instruments and indicators and recording cameras and graphmakers and everything else were put on the Guardians. And, of course, all of the various recording and indicating equipment had to be connected to the control cabin. That way each proud papa could be sure his babies weren't in any danger of being overlooked by the crew.

"So that's why Controls is about the only place on a Guardian where you don't know the ship's shell position. Almost anyplace else you can move a slip-screen

and see enough of Earth to guess at position. Of course, here in the lounge . . ." Christen waved his hand to the near end where the shell position indicator took up the width of the lounge ". . . you know exactly where we are. They had to move that stuff right out of the control cabin."

"I've thought it was a funny way to design a ship," Janushek said. He swallowed, started to say something, didn't.

Wendell was humming softly, then looking at Janushek. "Cards, dice, backgammon or talk? I'll even go for chess. Three-way, if Christen wants it."

Christen shook his head. "I'm foggy." He went over to the big console radio, snapped the switch, turned the dial. The set warmed, spit static into the air. Christen turned the volume down, hopefully, made the static softer. There were occasional almost clear bursts of music.

"A waste of time," Wendell said. "The only thing you can ever get clear is over the command set."

"No," Janushek told him. "I can make a working radio."

"You mean broadcast stuff?"

"Yeah."

"How?"

"Drop a long wire between the horns. Then hook three hundred feet of co-axial to the lead-in horn, and drop a hundred feet of straight wire below that. Weighted. Hanging straight down, of course."

"Sure." Christen looked interested. "Sure. That's easy. Gets it past the magnetic peel . . . *no* static!"

"Practically none."

"That's a deal, Jan . . . I'll get the stuff."

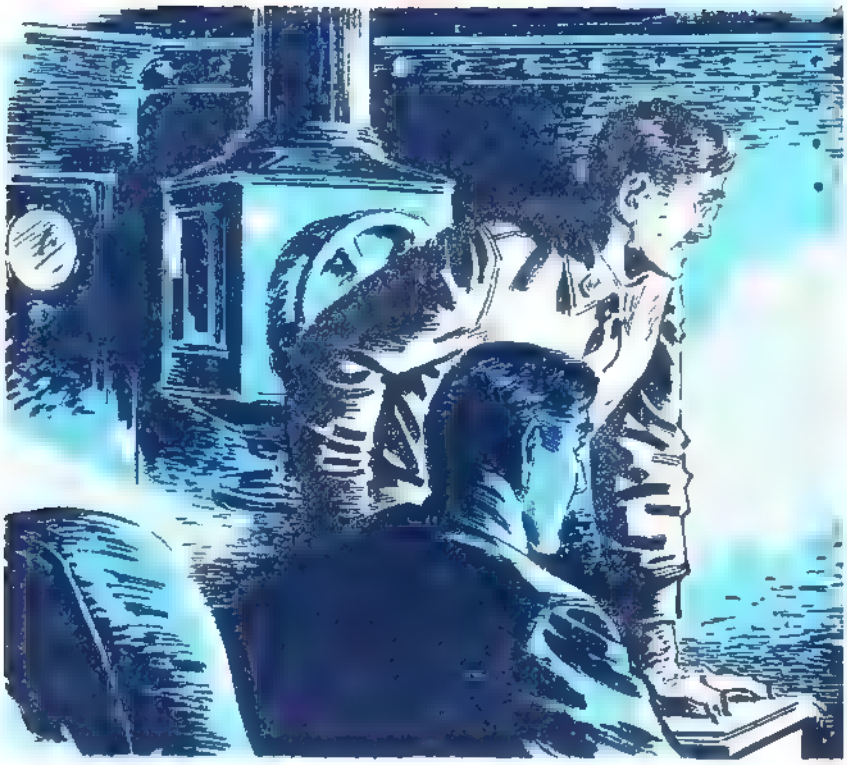
Janushek grunted, sank deeper into the chair. "Who's going to do it?" He looked from Christen to Wendell, then shrugged. "All right, I guess it was my idea. . . . Get rubber tape and aluminum foil, too."

Janushek kept telling himself that it was a cinch after the side hatch closed behind him. He hung on to the plastic coated rungs on the swell of the ship, watched the hatch push into place, just like it was shoving him out into the cold.

He remembered the cold, then, knew his suit was already beginning to lose heat. He lifted one hand, groped at the shoulder of the suit, found the three pronged plug.

The light was tricky, a bluish-grey that could be seen into, but not in. He knew the cover of the external power receptacle was close to his position, but he had to feel for it.

He got the cover back, guided the plug into place, twisted it secure. He waited a moment, until he felt the suit begin to heat,



then started down the rungs, the power line trailing out from the spring reel on the back of his suit.

There was only one way to do it: Keep your face toward the ship, keep your eyes on the welded and riveted plates only a few inches from the transparent helmet, and never never look down.

There was a light coating of ice on the side of the ship, more like frost than ice. Janushek found himself thinking of the short wave de-icers, laughed aloud at his thoughts, the sound of the laugh booming in the helmet. He went back to the same thoughts, concentrating on what he could remember of the de-icer circuits. Think of anything except that he was under the swell of the ship, and that it was a twenty-seven mile drop to Earth.

He saw the outline of the horn, fumbled at it with his gloved hand, made sure it was there. Then he reached in the pouch at his side, found the diagonals

and snipped the long wire running with the belly of the ship.

Let it trail at the other end, it didn't matter. He found the end of the coil of co-axial — No, that was the end with the straight wire and weight on it. He found the other end, already made into a hook. It took a moment to get it through the eye of the horn, twist it so it would hold.

He'd forgotten to start the roll of tape. It took sweating moments working with one gloved hand to get the end out far enough so he could start wrapping the connection. He used all of the tape, rather than try to cut it off, then put the aluminum foil around the tape, wired it on.

Satisfied, he looked down at the new antenna.

Janushek's hands tightened desperately on the rungs, his booted feet tried to get a grip of their own. He felt the quick surge of nerve-crawl under his skin. A moment of fighting, and then his eyes snapped back to the ship's side. He hung there, staring at the comforting metal, telling himself over and over that he was a few feet from safety, perfect safety. Safer than he'd be in traffic, safer than standing on a chair. Just as safe as could be.

He couldn't move, couldn't make one hand unlock its lifegrip on a rung. He could only cling there, telling himself he was safe, just as safe as could be.

He talked to himself as he might to a child learning to walk, encouraging, egging, nagging.

Then, wet with perspiration, he followed the power line back to the side hatch, unhooked himself, hit the hatchrapper.

Christen was in the lock when it opened, backing up abruptly when he saw Janushek coming in.

Wendell, white-faced, helped both men out of their suits.

"Sorry, Jan." Christen looked ashamed.

Janushek smiled, wiped his face: "Hot in that suit."

"They heat too much sometimes. I was ready — just in case, Jan. Guardians ought to be used to it by now, but nine out of ten times a guy goes out, someone has to bring him in. That's why I didn't offer to go. I *always* have to have someone come and pry me off the rungs."

Janushek shrugged. "You get so it doesn't bother you a bit."

Wendell gulped, stopped looking quite so scared. "I've never been out like that. I don't think I —" He tried to grin. "I'm not sure I could hold on. I think if I looked down I'd just want to let go and drop."

"There's plenty that's done that. They looked down, then let themselves go. The way it looks, you feel just like you could float softly down to Earth. You can't."

"No. Let's try the radio."

"Sure."

Christen and Wendell stood back, when they got to the lounge, let Janushek turn on the radio, tune it. There was some static between stations that was covered when volume was up on a station. Janushek punched buttons until he found a knocked-out cornet, adjusted the tone, then dropped into one of the big leather chairs.

Wendell looked as though he was ready to say something. Janushek closed his eyes, sank back and listened to the music.

There was a squeal, a loud hum, more squealing from the intercom speaker in the ceiling. It settled down to a loud hum.

They heard Fast clearing his throat, up in the control cabin. Then the speaker boomed. "Call just came in on the command set, fellows . . . a stand-by."

Janushek stood quickly, crossed to the radio and shut it off. He went back to the chair, relaxed and closed his eyes again.

The speaker hummed, brought Fast's voice back. "Stand-by still effective. There's been a blast in Chicago. That's all there is."

Wendell looked jumpy. "It can't be anything. I think they've got a pile there. Could one go off? It can't be anything, though. Not with the Guardians."

"It can't be anything," Christen told them. "Not with the Guardians in the high sky. There must be over two thousand of them."

"Over three thousand," Janushek corrected. He stood up and went back to the shell position indicator. He looked at the small, slowly turning globe, then brought the plastic curve down into place, snapped the projection bulb on, brought the magnification up.

"We'll pass south of Florida."

"The Chicago pile might have gone up," Wendell said. "They said a blast. They didn't say *atomic* blast."

Christen grunted.

"Well, I guess it was an atomic blast," Wendell admitted, "or they wouldn't have given us the stand-by."

Christen dropped into a chair, stood up, sat down again. "We'll know if they start feeding us concentration patterns."

Janushek made a gesture. "What's it like?"

"Like? Nothing quite like it. Except twenty-seven miles isn't high enough, even when just one Guardian is dropping." He turned to Wendell again. "You know the way those two atomic bombs we carry are tied? They're hitched together, five hundred yards of chain between them that stretches out when they're dropped one-two.

"They don't roll over. They drop straight. The bottom one explodes on contact. The other goes off right now, only it's five hundred yards above ground." Christen used his hands to make

a spreading-out motion, then a chopping-down motion.

"I watched the test drop from the first Guardian. I was there, with thirty-some big shots. They knew the chance they were taking a lot better than I did. I just did like I was told and figured I'd be safe.

"They dropped pretty. Don't ever play down those bomb sights; they take everything into consideration. I could see the under bomb going right in the middle of the target circle inside the target area. I guess you know about the target area. The engineers spent over a year building in that twenty-five mile radius circle. They put up everything: Concrete, steel, brick, plastics — Everything. Even artificial hills, roads, pillboxes, forts . . . but they didn't put up anything strong enough, and they didn't build it far enough out . . . and the twenty-seven miles wasn't high enough.

"You've got a good idea of what it did to the test area They gave it lots of publicity, then went ahead building the rest of the Guardians. But you'd have to see the area, before and after. Even then you couldn't quite believe it."

"No nation would attack us," Wendell decided. "They don't like the Guardians, but they want them to stay that: Guardians. They wouldn't want them to be avengers."

"It's all we got," Christen said. "Just that threat of retribution. We don't have any real protection."

"Guardians are enough," Janushek said "Some nation attacks the United States. So the Guardians are given the assembly pattern over the attacking nation. Three thousand ships, six thousand bombs — Strict suicide."

The intercom hummed. "Blast in Chicago was atomic. New blasts in Cincinnati, New York, San Francisco, District of Columbia, New Orleans, and Oak Ridge. We're still on stand-by."

"That's it, boys." Wendell stood up, stretched, and headed for the drinking fountain.

Janushek was pale, silent. Christen flexed his arm muscles, began talking. "Russia. It could be Russia. Maybe even Sweden. Sure. Argentina, maybe. Who else?"

Wendell finished at the drinking fountain. "That's three. It could be Germany."

"Still stand-by," Fast's voice came out of the speaker. "Another fifteen blasts reported. It's moving "

"It has to move," Janushek said. "This is the way they've guessed at it. All the rockets would come fast. They'd try to do one hundred percent of the damage in the first hour of the war, so there couldn't be a second

hour. The Guardians were supposed to —" He stopped, shrugged.

"Who is it?" Wendell looked sick. "Who?"

"Bulletin coming through." Fast's voice was very soft from the speaker. "I'm hooking the command set into the intercom."

They heard the sharp crackle of static as the command set was hooked in.

A minute went by, and another, and then a crisp voice came out of the speaker.

"Emergency Station K-91-G to all Guardian ships. You are still on stand-by. For your information: Estimate of damage done runs 95% of possible damage for first twenty-four hours of a remote controlled attack. However, this has been accomplished within the first half-hour since Chicago explosion. Stand-by.

"Stand-by. Strategical Command has announced all blasts caused by prepared land mines. Repeating: Blasts caused by hidden installations. No rocket or air activities by enemy.

"Further: Predictions from Strategical Command are that enemy will not immediately reveal himself. He cannot be traced with accuracy in present state of U. S. disorganization. Further: Guardian ships can stay in high sky approximately three weeks without supply ship service. Therefore it is certain enemy will not reveal himself in less than that time.

"We're beat already, fellows. Our threats of retribution are no good. We just don't know our enemy, won't know him in time to allow Guardians to operate.

"Strategical Command has just put Guardians on their own. Recommendation: Land your Guardians in out of the way spots, take what supplies you can and abandon ships after preparing Guardians to be self-destructive. That's it."

Only the static was left. The speaker hummed for a moment, then Fast's voice returned. "You heard it. I'm betting that's the last we'll hear from any official station."

Christen laughed suddenly, bitterly. "Easy, wasn't it?"

Janushek looked at him, kept his eyes away from Wendell. "Someone's taking over," he said slowly. "They're not going to stop with the United States. That's just the start. The world's in for it, the way it's never been before."

Christen nodded. "And we can't do a damned thing?"

"Yes we can," said Janushek. He walked over to the radio, switched the aerial jack into the command set. "Fast's wrong about that being the last we'll hear from an official station — this Guardian is the new official station."

"What do you mean?" asked Wendell.

"I mean that aerial I hooked up — it's capable of sending our own command set signal all over the Earth. And that's exactly what I'm going to do!"

Wendell half got up, but Janushek hit him before he could manage it. In almost the same motion he slammed into Christen and drove him against a bulkhead. Both men were unconscious. He went out and locked the door.

Janushek squeezed into the control cabin, saw Fast fiddling with the command set. The chief's usually florid face was pale, washed out. His eyes were moist, blinking.

"I'd like to take over, Fast."

Fast shook his head. "I'm doing all right. I'd just as soon stay here."

Janushek frowned. "You don't understand. I want to take over your command."

Fast muttered, straightened up. Janushek's fist caught him on the side of the face, drove his head back into his right shoulder. Janushek used his fist again, his knee. He dragged Fast out of the control cabin, snapped the control lever to "flick," then spun the dial until red showed in the network indicator window. He picked up the microphone and started talking.

"Emergency Station K-91-G-Extra to all Guardian ships. This is your call! Prepare netting of all Guardians. I'm going to keep on calling, keep repeating this. Don't attempt to answer. When you hear this, start your relay set. I want a world-wide net, all Guardians."

He called for fifteen minutes, then signed off after asking for a count by numbers of all Guardians in the net. It took another three hours before all ships had reported into the red network.

Janushek heard Fast stirring in the passageway. He went out, slugged the chief back into unconsciousness, then returned to the command set. He talked into the intercom, first: "Hurry it up, you guys. I'm nearly ready for those patterns."

Then into the microphone, slippery in his hand, he gave the orders he knew would be obeyed.

The innocent with the guilty!

On the next hour half the population of the world would be dead. Most of them would be in the innocent countries. But Janushek saw no choice. There was only the one thing to do: Throw Mankind into debt, make him work his way out, and hope it would come out clean this time. Janushek could give them a chance, a chance for a fresh, perhaps a better, start. Under the aggressor now attacking they'd never have the opportunity.

It was the only way.

# The BREAKING of JERRY McCLOUD

by GORDON K. DICKSON

**Jerry didn't want to bring his wife to this wild outpost without a stake—but he turned sentimental when he was vamped by a skem!**

WITH a last grunt and scramble he made it to the top of the ridge and flopped there on his belly, panting heavily in the thin air. He relaxed then, lying stretched out and limp, feeling the rough stone under him and listening to the frantic heartbeats that shook his body, until his breathing be-

came easier and he could lift his head without the red flecks of exhaustion swimming in front of his eyes.

He rose on one elbow and lit one of his few remaining cigarettes, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs and sending it out to plume upward in the brilliant sunlight. After he had smoked in silent pleasure for a few seconds, he rolled the burning cylinder to one corner of his mouth and lifted his glasses to his eyes for a look at the new valley below.

Jerry McCloud was deep in the Dgrabian mountains on the planet of Cas One, some eight hundred miles from the fur-baler's station that was his closest link with civilization, and sixty more from the little flitter it had taken the last of his savings to purchase. He was dirty, he was unkempt, and beneath the silicoid boots, breeches and jumper of a skem-stalker's outfit, his body was drawn and exhausted with the past month's gruelling search. He had exactly two weeks left.

He ran his glasses down the purple, poisonous vegetation that grew rankly in the shallow moss-mold of the little pocket valley some two hundred feet below his wind-swept perch on the ridge, covering the area casually as the experienced hunters had told him to do on a *First Look*. The big bushes, tall as the trees of an earth forest, jumped and slid past the lenses of his searching glasses. He raked the valley from one end to the other and saw nothing. Then, he put the glasses aside and leaned back against the ridge to rest his eyes before going back for the careful and slow searching of the ground, inch by inch, that would be *Second Look*.

He sat back comfortably with his back braced against an outcropping of the ridge rock and his feet stretched out toward the edge of the cliff that fell perilously away toward the valley, only a few feet from the soles of his boots. And he looked out over the rugged mountain country around him.

He could see for miles in the thin air. Under a sun larger and hotter than the kindly star of Earth, the mountains of the Dgrabian Range thrust their jagged snowless peaks toward the violet-colored sky. Under that sky was only bare rock, quick death and clinging life. Only in the sheltered valleys could the moss cling to the rock and the vegetation to the moss. There rock insects swarmed in black clouds and a few tough species of native animals fought out their short and violent lives, preying upon each other and being preyed upon in turn by the great skem-beasts he sought. All this in the valleys. Up where he sat on the ridges there was nothing but rock — rock and the eternal whistling of the wind.

It was a hard land. But Jerry

brought a hardness of his own to face it, the hardness of the pioneer — and something more, something almost dangerous, a fanatic quality that had gone unnoticed because unneeded back on Earth when he had married Tissa twenty-four short hours before shipping out on the great star-ship for labor in the lowland mines of Cas One, burning out the neodynium molybdate in big chunks with a spark torch from overhead seams, standing knee-deep in muck for five hour stretches. It was the kind of job where you sold your life in short installments at a high price. The wages were astronomical, by Earth standards, but the work broke more men than it made rich.

None of which knowledge cut any ice with Jerry. He could have come in as an ordinary immigrant and staked out land. Tissa's parents would have paid the passage for both of them, for Jerry was an orphan. But Jerry was neither to haud nor to bind, as the old Scot saying went. He would be indebted to no one. He would ship out alone. He would save his money. He would buy a business. And then, when an income had been assured, and a home built, he would send for Tissa.

And so he might have, if he had not been over-eager.

The mines were short of men. They were always short of men, for the incoming immigrant ships could not keep up with the expansion on the rapidly growing frontier planet. The average miner worked six months before quitting the man-killing job for one easier or better paid. Consequently, there was plenty of opportunity for Jerry to work extra shifts. And he did.

But a man cannot work additional shifts in the Cas One mines and remain completely human. Jerry became a drugged automaton, moving through a time that was a checkerboard of deadening work, exhausted sleep, and the weekly stupefying drunks, which, if you did not gamble, — and Jerry would not — were the only means available to break the endless round of labor. In the end, the only things holding any meaning for him were the figures in his Interworld Credits savings account and his plans for the future.

His letters reflected this. They continued to arrive, regularly by each mail ship, once every three weeks; but Tissa, reading them back in the familiar comfort of Earth, saw with wondering eyes the gradual and merciless evolution of the pleasant but somewhat stubborn boy she had married into a grim and violent man under the drive of a single implacable determination. For, as day by day, experience on Cas One taught him the impractibility of his early earth-bound dreams of a civilized

home and pampered wife, they only strengthened in his mind and became encysted in his own peculiar philosophy. A man did what he could (he wrote Tissa). He worked. A woman waited. And in the end, if he refused to compromise one jot or tittle of his ethics or his plans, in the end he won out. And that was the situation. There was no alternative.

It was cold comfort for Tissa, waiting back on Earth. But she held her peace until the inevitable letter arrived that told her of Jerry's collapse from overwork, one day as he was waiting with his night crew at the shafthead, to go on shift. Then, the dam of her patience broke and she wrote to Jerry, reminding him of his duty to her and demanding that he accept the help offered earlier by her parents and send for her — for without a passport authorized by Jerry and originating at the Cas One end, she could not come.

Jerry's answer was terse and harsh. He wrote briefly that she did not understand the situation on Cas One, and he did. The new planet was far too rough and dangerous a place for a girl like her until he had provided for her. He had left the hospital (against doctor's orders, though he did not tell her that) and had gotten another job with a fur-baler at one of the outlying trapper's stations. The pay was not as good as it had been in the mines, and it might be a little longer before he could send for her — half a year or so — but she would just have to wait until that time. And he wound the letter up with his familiar statement that a man did what he could and a woman had to accept that fact.

To this Tissa made no direct reply. She apparently dropped the subject and her letters reverted to their normal tone. This, in itself, might have made another man suspicious; but Jerry was so barred in by the rigidity of his own beliefs and conclusions, that Tissa's acceptance of his edict seemed the most natural thing possible. He continued to work at the fur-balers, gaining back a little of his strength at this easier job and only went so far in recognizing her point of view to keep his eyes open for an opportunity to stake one of the Skem-stalkers, who were the rare elite of the fur trappers and hunters who brought their furs to the fur-baling station.

It was an opportunity that only rare chance could bring. The Skem-stalkers were men of acute instinct and long experience, for the beast they stalked for its musk gland was the most dangerous of Cas One fauna, tremendous in size and strength and of an intelligence beyond that of any Earth animal. Their hunts were long and arduous. The musk they gathered was worth a small fortune. So it was only by the worst of bad

luck that one of these men would find himself without the money for equipment and supplies. But Jerry was by nature patient, as most determined men are, and he bided his time.

Unfortunately, biding one's time is a good plan only if the situation remains static. It did not do so for Jerry. After he had been at the fur baler's for a little over five months, there came, completely without warning, a letter from Tissa that scattered his plans like leaves before a high wind.

Quite simply Tissa wrote that she could no longer go on waiting. There was man at home who wanted to marry her, if she would divorce Jerry (and she named someone Jerry knew). If it had been physically impossible for her to come, it would have been a different matter, but Jerry knew that all he had to do was put aside his stubborn pride for a minute, and her father would write a check and she would be on her way. Therefore it was up to him. If he did not send for her by the second mail ship after receiving her letter, she would consider everything finished. Period.

The following morning after that letter came, the angry white sun of Cas One threw its fiery rays through the bunkshack window on a hollow-eyed and desperate Jerry. So direct was the man, so intense in his single-mindedness, that it had literally never occurred to him that he could lose Tissa. He had sat up half the night, reading and rereading the letter before he could convince himself that this was his wife writing, and that she meant what she said. And he had spent the second half of the long dark hours in a desperate struggle between his emotions and beliefs.

He had wakened at last to the realization that without Tissa the main reason and first cause for his effort was gone. What he had planned to do on Cas One had meaning only when it was done for the two of them. For him alone, it was needless. At the same time, he could no more scrap his convictions concerning a man's duty to his woman, than he could with his right hand tear his left arm from its shoulder socket. He tried; he tried desperately to put his pride aside, but always a remote, austere section of his mind reached out its cold hand to paralyse the fingers with which he lifted his stylus to write an acceptance of Tissa's ultimatum. His code had always been that a man makes no compromise with conditions. He wins or he loses but he does not compromise. And, search himself as he could, he could find no honestly acceptable reason for compromise now. To yield to Tissa would be to lose in winning. And to maintain his code, would be to win in losing.

Therefore, when the sun rose,

Jerry McCloud put away Tissa's letter unanswered and went out to place his fate in the hands of the gods — the gods of the pioneer who had brought him now at last to the heart of the Dgrabian mountains, two weeks before the last mail ship that could carry news of his success to Tissa, on a last and desperate gamble. For it took more than training and more than luck to separate Skem from undergrowth in this tangled chaos of stone and vegetation. It took what amounted to an instinct. And *that* had been the reason the experienced Skem-stalkers had stared and laughed at him when he first came to ask for advice on his hunting. In the end, seeing him serious, they had gone out of their way to help him. But they knew, as he did, that there was little they could tell him, and the sum total of their advice had only made his stalking easier.

So, Jerry, who had been too sensible a man to risk his money in the Company gambling houses at the mines, and now was risking all that he held on vastly longer odds, put thoughts of Tissa resolutely from his mind and turned back to the valley for his *Second Look.*

He began at the far end of the clefted rock, with his glasses at full power, so that he seemed to find himself hanging suspended with his eyes some six feet above the rough, uneven floor of the valley, and began to cover the ground painstakingly from one ridge wall of rock to the other. He went up the valley in scanning stages of five hundred yards, slowly, between which he would stop to rest his eyes.

By the time he had covered half of the valley floor, the little nerves in his forehead were jumping and he had begun to lose his way, going back through sheer error of weariness over the ground he had covered a second or two before. He lay down his glasses and squeezed his eyelids tight, then opened them and stared deliberately at the mountain peaks, five, ten, and fifteen miles off in the purple air. He stared at them for a long time.

The process was temporarily resting, and at the end of it he felt better. He turned back once more to the valley.

And this time he was rewarded.

He had scanned to the far valley wall and was turning back for another sweep to the near wall, when what seemed to be a flicker of movement beyond one of the big bushes caught his eye. He jerked his vision back to the bush and held it steadily. And again he glimpsed that tiny, elusive flicker of motion, dark beyond the silvery-grey of the thickly clustered bush-stems. He waited and it came once more.

His heart was pounding suddenly in his chest with excitement

— although that motion might be any animal, not necessarily a skem. He got to his feet, somewhat stiffly after lying such a long time there, and worked down the ridge until he could get at an angle to the bush that would enable him to see behind it. He found it, dropped flat again, trained and focused his glasses.

And success jumped into the scene of his vision.

In a small cleared area just behind the bush and under an overhang of rock, two skem had made a nest. They stood out clear and sharp in the afternoon sunlight, striking through the thinner top branches of the big bush.

It was a charming, almost idyllic domestic scene that Jerry trained his glasses on. The female, about the size of a half-grown black bear cub, and looking very like one with her dark pelt and inquisitive nose — the only marked difference being in the larger and more intelligent head — was bucking happily around the nest, humping her back like a playful kitten and raking together all sorts of twigs and trash to pack into the softly concave bed for the two of them. The male leaned drowsily with his back against the rock wall, like a fat old man, watching her, and looking less like a full grown bear than she did like a half-grown one. He was about the same size and pelt, as a full-grown bear but there the resemblance ceased. The intelligent head was far too large, and the long jaw was all bone and teeth like the jaw of a wolf. The short, stumpy and bowed hind legs would have looked ridiculous on a bear and the tremendous digging forelegs that could uproot boulders with the spade-like hands and six-inch claws that tipped them would have dragged the ordinary bear's shoulders from their sockets with sheer weight. Jerry could just see the high-mounded hump of muscle between his shoulders, holding him out from the cliff wall.

Jerry felt his breath go out in a long sigh of excitement and the glasses trembled in his hands. A male skem that large would have a musk bag around six pounds in weight — at eighty credits an ounce — while the female might well have a few ounces more in her smaller bag. He lowered his glasses and looked at his gun, for a second tempted to try the almost legendary creasing shot that would stun the male until he could come up to him. Then sense returned to him and he put the gun out of his mind.

He began to make plans.

Now, the musk-bag, or gland of the skem is actually a very strange and curious thing. It is fully developed in the male and usually rudimentary in the female, the reason for this being that the female is normally attached to a male, and, except in the case of an

emergency, has little need of the musk in her own gland.

The skem range, or hunt over a wide area and cache their kills high on the ridges where the thin and freezing air is not conductive to decay. Up there they are vulnerable to only one form of life and that is the little buzzing rock insects that like nothing better than to feed on decaying meat. To prevent this, the male makes use of his musk gland when setting up a cache, and the odor seems to keep the insects away. This is the use to which the skem puts his musk. Man puts it to use as a perfume base and will pay high prices to get it.

Unfortunately, once you find a skem, it is not just a simple matter of shooting him through the head, then walking up to him and cutting off his musk bag. The reason for this is that, on death, the muscles that control the orifice through which the musk is sprayed, relax, and inside of a very few seconds, the valuable musk has all leaked out and been lost. There remain two ways in which you can get it. One, if your skill with solid projectiles is slightly superhuman, is to crease the male skem's skull with a shell, deep enough to knock him out, but not deep enough to kill him. Two, you can do what all orthodox skem-stalkers do; and that is to walk the male down, keeping him always upon the move and blowing up his caches as he comes to them until, between weariness and hunger, the huge animal collapses. Then you have nothing to worry about but the female, who, having no claws, no teeth to speak of, and little commercial worth, can be safely clubbed on the head and forgotten.

Of course, in Jerry's case, there was no doubt about which procedure he would follow. He would walk the skem down. The only question was, since it was now late in the afternoon, whether to start the skem moving at once, or to wait until the following morning. A wise hunter, with unlimited time, would automatically have bedded down for a good sleep — knowing the skem do not move at night — and started out early the following morning.

But that second mail ship deadline — two weeks away — was in Jerry's mind, and he decided not to wait. Accordingly, he laid down his glasses, picked up his gun, adjusted the scope and sent an explosive shell crashing into the overhanging rock face a dozen or so yards above their heads. Then he stood up, elevated his gun and sent another round booming into the air.

He laid down the gun and picked up the glasses. The nest jumped toward him.

The skem had taken the alarm. The huge male was already reared up on his hind legs facing

Jerry; and, as he watched, the little female made a flying leap into the air and clung to the hump between the male's shoulder, which was her perch in time of stress or danger. Jerry could just see her sharp little nose and alarmed eyes peering up at him over the male's thick shoulder. The male stretched up to his full height, rattling the scimitar-like claws of his forepaws together and his deep and angry roar boomed up out of the valley to Jerry, daring him to come down and fight like a skem. Jerry grinned and sent another shot into the rock face above them.

The distance was too great. Had it been half as much, ridge slope or no ridge slope, the male, well rested and in good condition, would have charged. But Jerry, mindful of the warnings given him by the experienced stalkers, had made sure to be too far off, and the angry male, seeing it was no use, wheeled, dropped down on all four legs, and went off at a clumsy gallop up the valley, the female clinging to his hump and looking backward over her shoulder. Jerry followed, keeping them in sight from the top of the ridge and carefully maintaining his distance.

They worked down the valley, the male soon dropping from his gallop into the deceptively loose amble that can actually cover a surprising amount of ground. Jerry allowed himself to fall behind, and followed them with his glasses. At the far end of the valley, the male halted, and, turning around, stood up once more and looked back to see if he had lost Jerry.

Jerry sat down quickly in the shadow of a boulder and kept his glasses trained. It was evidently enough to hide him, for the male, after peering closely at the ridge-top for several minutes, finally gave up as if satisfied, and sat down. The little female immediately hopped off his back and began to inspect him tenderly. It was actually rather comic, seen from a distance through the glasses, the seated male puffing like an old man who has hurried up a flight of stairs too fast, patting his chest gently with those enormous forepaws, and the little female fussing and fluttering about him solicitously.

But it would not do to let them settle down again. Jerry waited until the male had got his breath back, then moved up once more and sent another explosive into the ground about ten yards away from them.

This time the male was furious. He located Jerry on the skyline and bellowed at him like a wounded bull. He tore at the ground with his hind feet, sending a shower of pebbles in all directions, and even made one short abortive rush in Jerry's direction. But in this case, too, he was forced

to move on, and Jerry followed him into the rays of the declining sun, over the ridge and into the next valley.

Here, the top of the ridge was still in sunshine, but the valley itself was beginning to gloom over in the long mountain twilight. The skem realizing now that this was no chance or sporadic pursuit did not bother to look back, but went steadily on at his loose-

limbed amble, and Jerry, scrambling along the backbone of the ridge, began to fall behind.

The shadows in the second valley thickened and merged. The big bulk of the male, with the female on his back, pulled steadily ahead into them and was lost. Finally, even the distant crashings of his passage through the small undergrowth ceased.

Winded and disheartened, Jerry

flopped down and trained his glasses on the far cleft of the valley end. Even at full power they would hardly reach far enough in the fading light to tell him much. But it was his only chance. The skem could not come back this way without taking a chance of being heard; so if Jerry did not spot him going through the cleft. he must — and Jerry crossed his fingers — be still in this valley.

So Jerry lay, the first chill breeze of the night wind that would whip the peaks, cooling his sweating body, and strained his eyes through the glasses at the cleft

And his patience was rewarded. In the last moment before the sun fell redly behind the distant peaks, he saw a black dot move up out of the valley below him, through the cleft and away.

He forced his tired body to its feet and plowed ahead. The chances were that the cleft opened into only one similar valley, but he could not play with chances. not with success and all it meant to him so close. He plowed on in the last thin light reflected from the high glaciers of the peaks, and reached the cleft in time to see. thankfully, that one. and only one, valley lay beyond it, a lake of darkness stretching away at his feet. He sighed with relief, knowing now that the skem would have bedded down itself for the night, and, finding himself a high rock where any approach of an animal would be sure to wake him, zipped up his silicoid suit, turned on its heater. and went gratefully to sleep.

He found the skems easily the following morning. The male, for all his savage urge to evade Jerry, had been halted by the valley darkness before he had gotten much beyond the cleft. He was resting in the early morning light as Jerry came up and the female was playing a little love-game, romping up to his resting form. and then dancing away again. Jerry fired into the ground behind them and started them off again.

Then the long stalk began. The male skem is a large animal and requires huge amounts of food daily. Under Jerry's harrying he was not getting it, and the encroaching weakness kept him from again pulling away from Jerry. Still. it was amazing to witness the strength stored in that tremendous body. Although he was carrying a good eighty pounds in the weight of the female on his back. and although his route through the valley forced him to cover half again the distance Jerry traveled on the ridge-tops, he again walked Jerry almost to the point of exhaustion on the second and third days.

On the fourth day they came to one of the food caches, which Jerry blasted with an explosive shell

On the fifth day, the male began to slow perceptibly. He carried the female with visible effort, and, unless Jerry followed closely, was liable to sit down and rest. Now, at last, Jerry found it was no longer necessary to shoot behind them to keep the male moving. All he had to do was to show himself on the skyline, or shout between the echoing rock walls, and the male would wearily take up the rout again.

On the sixth day, the female no longer rode. She ran ahead with the male nosing her anxiously to make sure she kept his huge bulk between her and Jerry. Along toward evening, they came to another food cache, which Jerry blasted.

The destruction of this last hope seemed to push the male beyond the edge of sanity. He turned toward Jerry and sat down, his little black eyes burning with hate. Jerry showed himself, shouted, waved his arms, and finally shot into the ground some twenty feet short of him. But the skem would not move.

In desperation, Jerry placed his shots closer and closer to the male, without success. It was not until one of the shattered rock fragments, flying through the air, cut the female and she yipped, a high, short scream, that the male abandoned his position of stubborn defiance and, pushing her before him, staggered away from the shattered cache and over the ridge into the saving blackness of the next valley.

That night, Jerry celebrated. He lit a fire and pitched a regular camp on the ridge overlooking this last valley. Following his release from the hospital he had laid part of the blame for what had happened to him on the drinking he had been doing to see him through his double shifts. Consequently, he had sworn off, and with the same grim decision that had characterised him since he landed on Cas One, he had bought a single pint bottle and carried it around with him, unopened, as a symbol that he had no right to pleasure until the job he had set himself was done.

Now, knowing that tomorrow would see the end of the stalking, he opened the bottle after eating, and drank a toast to himself and his future. The alcohol spread, glowing, through his bloodstream and the stars winked to him in congratulation from overhead. He held the bottle up to the one that lighted his home planet, and drank to Tissa there; and a feeling of power ran singingly through him.

"A man," said Jerry, triumphantly, to the listening night, "does what he can." It was his accolade to himself, and he drank the last of the bottle to it, thinking with fierce joy of the man who wanted Tissa, and now would not have

her, because he, Jerry, had set his goal, and kept to it without faltering, and attained it.

He went to sleep.

He awoke, late in the morning, to a feeling of panic. What if the skem had taken advantage of his laziness to escape? He left his camp, unbroken, and snatching up his rifle, ran off along the ridge.

But he need not have worried. The progress of the skem had been pitifully slow, and he almost overran them before he noticed them, toiling painfully through the underbrush, almost directly below him. He heaved a deep sigh of relief, and sat down on a boulder to catch his breath.

He looked down on the struggling pair, as his beating heart slowed down. There was no longer any need for him to push, no need for him to harry and shout and fire at them. They had risen at dawn with the hopeless realization of the hunted animal that the pursuit was to the death and, knowing escape was hopeless, yet continued to flee, blindly, instinctively. They would walk now, until one or the other dropped, aiming at the distant end of the valley which they had no hope of reaching, but struggled on for, none the less.

Jerry looked down at the two black figures, the little and the big. There was some energy left in the female, but the male was almost done for. He had abandoned all attempts to move on four legs and was swaying forward on the stumpy rear legs, which, being jointed only at their connection with the backbone, could not collapse through weariness and let him down. He tottered on, like a drunken man, swaying from a balance on one leg to a precarious balance on the other; and the little female led him, walking upright herself, clutching one of his enormous forepaws with both of hers.

Jerry leaned weakly back against his boulder. Now that the awakening flush of excitement was gone, he began to feel a hangover from last night's drinking that was not a hangover in the proper sense of the word, but a dull, dead feeling that filled him with obscure distaste for himself and all the necessity of things. He shook his head in the thin mountain air, to clear it, and tried to summon up the feeling of glory and success that had filled him the evening before. But it was gone, finished by being celebrated prematurely, and all that was left was the distasteful morning-after feeling of an unpleasant job yet to be done.

He pushed the feeling from him, unclipped the glasses from his belt and raised them to his eyes. The two skem had struggled a little way further up the valley, but they could surely not go much

farther; and, indeed, even as their figures jumped up toward him through the glasses, the male halted in a little open space, and stood, swaying.

The female tugged anxiously at him, but it was like tugging at the mountain, itself. For a second more he stood there, balanced. Then a shiver ran through his great body, and, like the mountain itself, he leaned, tottered, and fell.

The female flung herself on him and a desperate, wailing cry came from her; welling up to Jerry where he stood on the ridge, wildly keening out of the valley. It ran through him like a sword, and he shivered, in the warm sunlight of early morning, standing on the ridge. He shook the feeling from him, gripped his rifle tighter, and plunged from the rocky ledge, down the steep slope, through the tangled bushes and undergrowth, to the valley and the two who waited below.

Branches whipped at his face and the big bushes obscured his vision. In a second, he, who had made the long stalk through the clear emptiness and freedom of the ridges, was swept into what seemed a tangled and suffocating nightmare of dust and snatching vegetation. For a moment it seemed as if the valley, in sudden defense of its own, was making a desperate, last ditch fight to save the two victims; and in a sudden gust of furious anger, Jerry slashed wildly at the scrub around him, trying to flail his way through. Then reason returned to him, and he stopped fighting, turned, and worked his way along the face of the slope until he came to an open spot from which he could get his bearings.

He located the skem and worked his way down toward them. The anger was gone, now; but his usual sureness of purpose had not returned to replace it. Instead there was the same dull sickness he had felt up on the ridge, and he plowed savagely down the slope, wanting to get it done and over with.

He came at last through the final screen of bushes and out into the open space where the male skem lay. And there he halted looking at them.

They stared back with wide eyes. It was the first time Jerry had looked into their eyes. The glasses had brought their faces close but to them he had always been an object far in the distance and they had not focused upon him. Now they faced each other, not fifteen feet apart, and looked at each other, and there was neither anger nor hate in the eyes of the two skem, but that same sort of awed wonder you see in the eyes of islanders when the tide has gone out and out, uncovering rocks never before seen in the memory or legend, and now they see, looming and terrible, the on-

rushing wall of the tidal wave that they cannot escape, bearing down upon them. So the skem looked at Jerry, with a questioning too deep for fear.

Jerry had been warned to keep a close watch on the female at the end. She might do anything, they told him, howl, or run off, or attack; and although, even if she did attack she could do little harm, it was a good thing to watch her. But in spite of himself, the male skem drew his attention. Titanic, he lay, a humped and fallen mass and the too-intelligent eyes with their strange wonder locked with Jerry's. And Jerry made the fatal mistake of hesitating.

There was no accusation there, but Jerry felt a sudden rush of guilt. He had followed these two too closely and too long to think of them in the abstract, and it was his first kill. The too-intelligent eyes burned into his, and he reached desperately for the thought of Tissa as justification.

"Sorry," he heard himself say suddenly to the male, in a voice that echoed strangely in the stillness, "but I can't help it. The best man won. I have to, that's all. Just like you had —" The words stuck suddenly in his throat, and with a surprise that was almost horror, he realized abruptly that he was asking the animal to forgive him for murdering it. He shook his head, reversed his rifle so as to use the butt for a club, and started forward.

But now the female took a hand. She had been watching Jerry all this time, crouched by her male, and now, seeing him move, she gave a sudden sound like a throaty purr and started toward him.

Jerry pivoted watchfully to face her, body tense. So she was going to attack. All right. He shifted his grip on the rifle and half-raised the butt.

But the female was not attacking. She humped her back and hopped toward him, then shied, then sidled a little distance away, looking over her shoulder, and, still purring, hopped back again. She played around him, gamboled before him like some monstrous kitten.

Stunned and frozen, Jerry watched her, wondering if she had gone suddenly mad, feeling the sweat from the palms of his hands slippery on the tightly gripped metal of the rifle. What had gotten into her? Surely after the affection she had shown for her mate, surely she could not be welcoming his killer.

And then it struck him, a realization of a love so great that his much prized constancy and labor for his Tissa paled to something weak and mean by comparison. The female could not fight, least of all this strange creature that had hounded to impotence her mighty mate. Had bare

paws and tiny teeth done any good, she would have flung herself at the very muzzle of his gun. But that was hopeless and she knew it. And so she had done the only thing she knew to do, the only thing she was equipped to do, out of great ignorance and great love. She had taken all the instinctive tricks and enticements she knew, the same that had won the heart of her male, and was offering them with all her heart and will to Jerry, in the hope that she could seduce him from killing the great creature that lay helpless beyond her. So she played.

Perhaps, if Jerry had killed her in that first stunning moment of realization, when understanding was not unmixed with a certain wild urge to laughter at the ridiulousness of her offering, he might still have brought his stalking to its proper end. But once the sense of her motivation had begun to strike home, the impossibility of it grew with every passing second. Jerry, least of all men, who placed the abstract values far above the limping realities of life and had almost killed himself in the mines to give his wife what *he* conceived she wanted, least of all could Jerry refuse what was offered to ransom at such a price. It struck too close to home.

And so, leaving a minor fortune, foolishly, but Jerry-like to the end, he turned and fled from the heart-rending scene.

Tissa got her letter, by the second mail ship, as ordered. It was a long letter, a *very* long letter, for Jerry. It recounted all the things he had not considered it within her province to know, before, and which he had left out of his previous letters. It told about his reaction to her ultimatum and it told of the skem-stalking in detail.

"— and so, honey, (it finished up) you see me a little older, a real little bit wiser, and — except for the flitter, which of course can be sold for something — just about as broke as when I landed. I'll never be a hunter. I'm not much of a fur baler. And I don't know just how we'll live if you come, but I imagine we'll get by somehow. I think you'll find me easier to live with than I would have been if things had worked out the way I wanted them. I still think a man does what he can, and that's it; but I've added on to that the fact that maybe a woman does what she can, and that's it, too. So, if you still want to come, go ahead and borrow from your parents as much as you need, and maybe, if we're lucky, we'll pay them back someday. I've already started the papers for you through Emigration, here, and I'll be waiting down at the skyport for you every ship day. I guess I kind of need you, Tissa.

All my love,

Jerry.

SALE TODAY!
SALE TODAY

# ELECTION CAMPAIGN

By

WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

**It's governments that make war — so when you are one of a very few survivors, it would be smart to consider what kind of government you are going to campaign for!**

He stood on his hill and looked at his hands and stretched the ache out of his neck. His hands were blistered and sore; the nails of the first and second fingers of his left hand were black and throbbing.

He thought, *I didn't learn a hell of a lot in this civilization now gone. I never even learned to use a hammer and saw. All I really learned was the fast buck.*

He hadn't been a man given to talking to himself, Johnny Larson. Not when there was anybody else to talk to. There wasn't — now. The wind was from the south and it brought him the stench from the village. He turned

away from it.

His tools, his nails, his lumber had come from the village. He'd gone there, not knowing or caring if the plague was still active. He'd gone there in preference to Vialogo because Vialogo was undoubtedly still radioactive. A *possible* death he could risk; a *certain* death he was not ready for.

And why not? He remembered reading, somewhere, the statement of a man who'd claimed he'd rather live all his life on a ledge three feet wide and six feet long than be dead.

Why? There were a lot of 'whys'. The big one was why Johnny Larson, of all people, should have survived the debacle. Why should *he* have been on the fringe between atomic blast and the swift plague? Had Somebody planned it that way? Johnny's knowledge of Somebody was even more vague than his knowledge of home construction.

He turned, now, to look at the lop-sided, one room structure he called home. It wasn't much, but he'd built it. With his own hands, now sore and scabbed over. Johnny Larson. home builder.

On a hill, he'd built it, in plain sight of anyone who might still be alive. In the hope that anyone still alive would see it, and drop in. Visitors welcome.

He went in and sat on the linoleum covered floor, thinking of the village, of Portsville. It had taken a strong stomach to make the necessary trips for lumber and canned goods and tools. Some had died in the streets and in their places of business. The hardware man had fallen across his open doorway. On three of the trips, Johnny had stepped over him; on the fourth he had moved him, dragging him over behind the counter and out of view.

If he had an excavator and a bull-dozer, he could bury them all in Portsville, just as they'd buried the Japs on Tarawa in that earlier war. That would kill the stench. Time, too, would kill the stench; it was already growing weaker.

All his life, he'd been a city boy. But the day his section of the world came to an end, he'd been coming back from Nick's country place and got lost in this meadowed hinterland. He'd seen the scores of planes and the mushroom of smoke over Vialogo. He'd seen the cloud, like a dust cloud, over Portsville. He'd seen the glare and heard the earth-shaking boom of it — and lived.

Lucky Johnny Larson, that was his history. Up out of the lower east side into the land of the fast dollar. Big time bookie, right hand to Czar Nick Colias, he'd had a fine life. Caddy convertibles

and leggy, bosomy blondes and sharp, well-washed friends and recognition in his trade.

Two hundred and six days of combat in that second world war and not a scratch to show for it. He'd come out of the service loaded with poker money and in three days he was working for Nick Colias. And how can you go wrong, working for Nick?

And then, in Korea, the spark had kindled, again. This one, Johnny sat out, while flame swept the world, while France burned and China crumpled and Russia erupted into wasteland. In the chaos of universal conflict, when everyone worked or fought, from eight to eighty, Johnny and Nick and a few of the chosen lived high off the hog at Nick's lodge. Smart.

But being smart wasn't enough. You had to be lucky, lucky enough *not* to be at Nick's lodge, near Vialogo, when disaster came. Lucky enough to be lost in the exactly right spot at the right time.

His Caddy was still down on the highway and there were two filling stations in Portsville. But the pumps were electric, and there was no power. Later, he'd find a way to get gas. Later, when the stench was gone, and the bodies were bones.

Later, he'd make some patrols and find out who else had survived, if anybody. There wasn't any reason to assume he was the last man in his or any world, but the feeling had been growing in him, as the silent days followed the quiet nights, as the only movement in sight was caused by the wind.

The grass waved, under the wind, the trees nodded and bent. In the last week, some of the dust haze had gone and clouds were again visible, drifting in front of the wind.

Me and the wind, Johnny thought, still on the job. And he'd seen a snake, a black creature about three feet long, down near the creek. Me and the snake, Johnny thought, and where's my Eve, to complete the production?

He thought a lot of screwy things, there being no one to talk to. He even thought about Somebody, quite often, trying to remember what he'd heard in a non-jocular way about Him. All he remembered were the nativity scenes from department store windows at Christmas, and the stories about Him that could be worked into gags.

Now, sitting on his linoleum covered floor in his new one room house, Johnny was thinking about girls, again. About all the blondes, and why couldn't he remember their faces? He could picture only one face, and that was none he recognized. It seemed to be a composite picture of all of them, and strangely cow-like.

He stood up, and went to the doorway, looking down the slope toward the road. Nothing but grass and trees and creek. At Vialogo, there was nothing at all. At Portsville, there was too much; blue and bloated bodies, lying where they'd fallen.

In the distance, down the road, something moved. Johnny stared, holding onto the doorway, trying to make out the dot coming up the road from Portsville.

An animal? A man? Closer, it came, moving slowly, along the left edge of the road.

A woman.

She seemed to be looking his way, and now she waved, and came forward no further. Johnny ran down to the Caddy. He had only a few gallons left in the tank he was saving for an emergency, but this looked like an emergency.

Even as he started the motor, he saw her waver, then topple. As he swung the Caddy in a U turn, he saw her trying to rise again. She was kneeling, bent forward, one hand on the ground, when he drew abreast.

"Easy," Johnny said. "Easy, sister. You're going to be all right."

She looked up, and tried to smile. Her eyes were glazed, her cheeks sunken, her dark hair disheveled and lustreless.

Johnny's hands were supporting her under the arms, now, and she rose, with his help.

"I saw you in town," she said. "I saw you, so often, and I tried to call, but —" Her eyes closed, and she slumped against him.

He carried her to the car. He drove her back to the house, and carried her up the hill and put her on the piled blankets in one corner of the room.

She was a woman in her late twenties, dressed in a jumper dress of some ribbed material with a soiled, blue silk blouse. Johnny opened a can of tomato juice, and brought it over to her.

"Food," he said, and repeated it until her eyes opened.

She shook her head. "It's not that. I managed to crawl next door and get some food. It's just — I'm still weak from the — plague — " Her eyes closed again.

He sat there for minutes, and her eyes opened. "Is there anyone else? Have you seen anyone else? Is there a radio, working, some place, so we'd know —"

"My car radio is working, but it's only good for a couple hundred miles," Johnny said. "I can't get anything on it. Where were you?"

"In the library. I'm the librarian. I — There was nobody else in the library, when the planes came." She stirred on the blankets. "Perhaps I could use some of that tomato juice."

He brought it to her, and helped her sit up. She drank about a quarter of the can, and handed it

back. "Could we sit — outside? I want to be in the sun, to see the sun. Today was the first time, I —"

"I know what you mean," Johnny said. "Sure. Here, put your arm around my neck." He knelt beside her.

Together, they moved slowly to the door, and she indicated the tree about twenty feet away. They sat under that. She rested her back against the trunk, facing down toward the road.

"In Portsville," she said, they're all —?" Her eyes searched his.

"They're all dead, I guess. I didn't see anybody alive. I didn't investigate, much. It's —" He shrugged.

"I knew them all," she said, "every one of them. Children and adults and — Oh, Lord. We might be —"

"The last people in the world?" He looked down toward the road. "I was getting the news on the radio before it blanked out, before they hit Portsville and Vialogo. All the big cities are gone, and probably all the small towns. Portsville must have been one of the last to be hit. Russian planes, they were, suicide planes. Maybe some of the flyers are alive, and maybe not. Those jobs weren't built to come back. And if they used chutes, there's a ninety percent chance they landed in radioactive territory, which would take care of them. There's a chance, all right, but I wouldn't make book on it. There's a chance we're the last in the world."

She was staring at him. "You sound so — so matter of fact."

He stared back at her. "Why not? *I'm* alive. Lady, I'm no bleeding heart. It's a cruel world."

She seemed to cringe, staring at him. "What kind of — of monster are you?"

"Monster? Me? Johnny Larson? You got me wrong, sister."

"You saw those people," she whispered, "in the streets, in the stores, in their homes in Portsville. Children. That's happened all over the world."

"So? Did I start it? I fought one war, honey. For sixty-six dollars a month plus twenty percent overseas. Nobody called me a monster then. Let's not argue, huh? Let's get along."

She said nothing, staring down at the road.

Typical hick wren, Johnny thought, even to the jumper. Drying up in a cow town library, living a second-hand life in books, picking up dust with the books, dehydrating.

She plucked a blade of grass and considered it. "Johnny, your name is, Johnny Larson? I'm Jane Deering."

"A pleasure," Johnny said.

"I'm sorry," she went on, "I — said what I did. You're no more monster than — any of us. I mean, we're all to blame."

"Not me," he said. "And not you, probably. We're just punks, both of us. We didn't have any choice. We never had any choice. The big wheels decide all that."

"We — elect the big wheels."

"We didn't elect Uncle Georgi. And nobody else did, either, sister. You read too much, probably, Jane."

"Probably," she said. "But — oh, what difference does it make, now?"

"Exactly," he said. "Later, we can argue, if you want. Now, you've got to think about getting your strength back."

"Oh?" she said. "Why? You're alive. You're no bleeding heart."

He grinned at her. "A man likes company. I was getting punchy, talking to myself."

She made no comment to that. She said, "Do you think that creek water is safe? I could certainly use a bath."

"I've been drinking it; I hope it's safe," Johnny said. "I've some men's clothes, clean ones, if you'd like to change. And a whole case of soap." He paused. "Do you thing you're strong enough?"

She nodded. "After the fever, I guess it was just — shock. And the mind can absorb only so much of that. I'm sure a bath will help."

While she bathed, he started a fire in the stone fireplace he'd built in the front yard. He had coffee on and soup and was opening a box of crackers when she came back.

There was a noticeable improvement. Her skin was clear and fresh, her eyes less dull. She'd rolled up the legs of the slacks he'd given her, and the sleeves of the oxford shirt. She was no beauty, but she had something all of the blondes had lacked.

"I thought some soup would be good," Johnny said. "In the hospital they feed you a lot of soup, I hear. But if there's anything else you want, I've probably got it."

"You got this in town? You —"

"I stepped right over them. Look, Jane, a fact's a fact. They're dead. It could have been worse. They died quick, and if there's some place to go to, after that, they're there, by now. Maybe you think I'm hard-boiled and maybe I am. But if you're going to simper, don't do it around me."

She looked at him gravely, and sat down nearby. "You're right. You're probably more right on a lot of things than I am."

They ate in silence. Johnny caught himself studying her from time to time, and she wasn't the kind of girl he would have studied in the pre-debacle days. But he'd been a long time alone.

The sun was going down as they cleaned up the dishes in the creek. The dust haze from the west obscured it some, but they felt its warmth and saw the red pageant of the western sky.

Johnny said, "There's — only

the one room. You'll have to believe I'm a gentleman."

She didn't answer.

"I'm kind of getting the hang of that hammer and saw," he went on. "I can build another room. Or we can clean out one of those houses in town."

"No," she said. "I couldn't go back there." She looked at him evenly. "And what difference does it make? Who's going to judge us?"

Which were five words you could take a couple of ways. By looking at her, Johnny couldn't tell which way would be smart. It was a restless night.

In the morning, he was up with the sun. She still slept as he went down to the car and turned on the radio. Again, there was nothing.

He went to the creek and washed, bringing a bucket of water back with him to the fireplace.

The entire bucket of water was warm and he had a smaller can boiling for coffee, when she appeared in the doorway.

He said, "I heated some water. You can wash right here, if you want."

"*I* should be doing the cooking," she said. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"I'm saving you for the big game," he said brusquely. "There's some warm water here, for washing."

She came down to the fire, and poured the water from the bucket into a basin. Johnny put the big iron skillet onto the flat stones that held it over the fire. He kept his eyes on the skillet.

"You were restless, last night," she said. She was drying her face.

"Was I? You want some eggs, too?"

She didn't answer, and he looked at her. She looked better, more composed. She looked almost pretty. Well, they'd looked pretty on the islands, too, after a campaign.

She said, "I saw you go down to the car. Nothing on the radio?"

"Nothing. Maybe we ought to put a flag up, some kind of rag on a pole on top of the hill. Something that can be seen a long ways."

"It might be a good idea. Why were you restless, last night?"

"Don't heckle me," he said. "You know why I was restless."

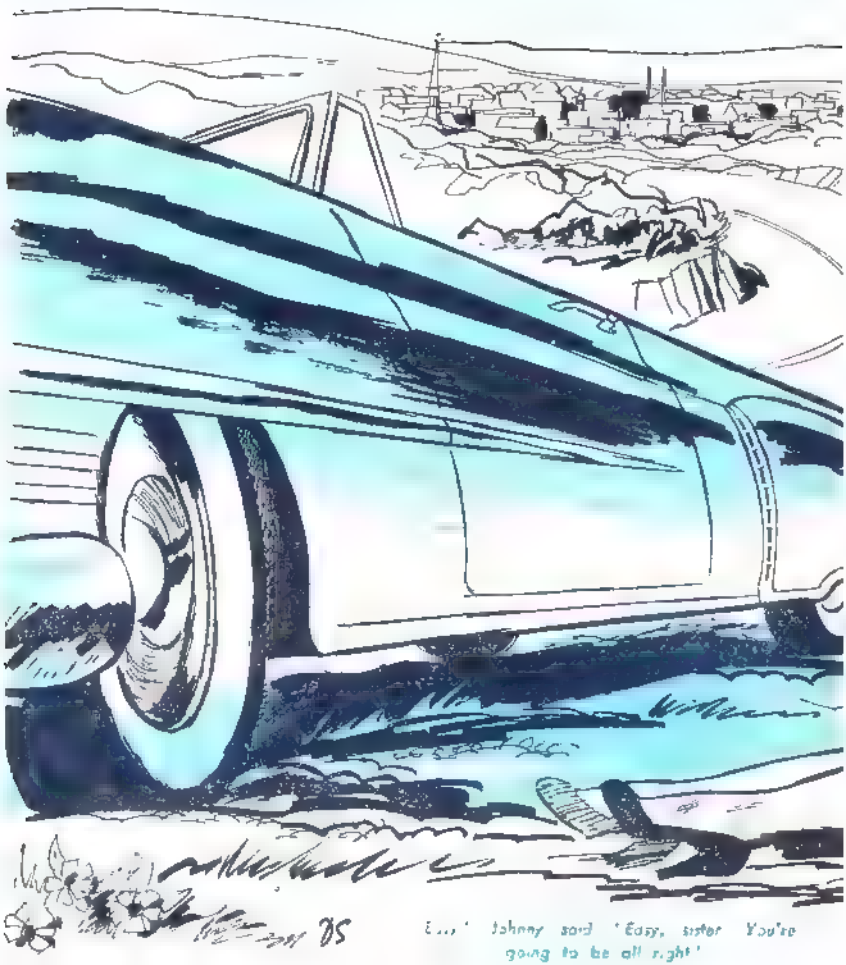
"I wasn't sure. Is that all you lived for before — before Armageddon? Was it just — women with you?"

"I knew a lot of them. They're better than books, I found out as a kid."

"Too many thought that," she said quietly. "And now —"

"And now you're guessing, again," he said scornfully. "What did *you* do but sit in that library, and maybe go to literary teas once in a while? What could you have done?"

"I don't know," she said. "May-



[illegible] Johnny said 'Easy, sister. You're going to be all right.'

be — with your greater experience, you have some ideas."

The sarcasm missed him. He said, "Sure. When a guy like Adolph or Quisling or Uncle Georgi starts to shape up, you kill him. There's always another wheel to take his place, but there's always a lot of ammunition, too. After a long and serious study of it, that's the only solution I can find."

"Very profound," she said, and this time he didn't miss the sarcasm.

"I'm not a profound guy. But it worked in Louisiana, maybe you'll remember."

"Did it?"

"It worked. There'll be other jerks in Louisiana, but not with the same personality."

"There won't be other jerks in Louisiana any more," she said.

"Oh — Johnny —" She was crying. She held the huge bath towel to her face, while she sobbed.

He didn't touch her, or say anything. Dames, dames, dames . . . No wonder most men confined them to limited uses.

She got hold of herself, after a few minutes. She folded the towel carefully and put it on the grass beside her. She said, "I'm pretty good with eggs. Let me do it."

She *was* pretty good with eggs. And the bacon was just right. The heat of the fire brought some color to her cheeks, and the terror was leaving her eyes. Blue, her eyes were, blue as the sky before — what was that word she'd used — before Armageddon.

He said, "What does that mean — *Armageddon?*"

"Oh, actually it means the place where the last great battle is to be fought. Commonly, it means the end of the world, more or less. It's from the Bible."

"That's why I missed it," Johnny said.

"You and millions of others," she said.

He grinned at her. "We're arguing again. Okay, chew on this. My old lady was Russian. Peasant. Very religious people, the Russian peasants; they all had their Bibles. But not Uncle Georgi's boys. Who wound up on top there?"

"And where are they, now?"

"They're with the others, with the peasants. And the worms can't taste the difference."

"What a horrible thought," she said. "You're a strange man, Johnny Larson."

"I'm standard," he said, "except for the Caddy. You should have got out of that library more."

"Maybe. I'm glad I didn't. Let's get to work on the flag."

They worked on it all morning. Johnny cut a long branch from one of the red oaks on the hill, and tied one of the brighter blankets to it. Then he wired it to the mammoth oak on top of the hill.

When he came down again, scratched and sweaty, she said, "It's a symbol, isn't it?"

"If you say so, it is. I could sure use some lunch."

There wasn't much dialogue during lunch. Johnny wasn't sure if she was miffed about something, or just remembering the past days. He was tired, and he went into the house after lunch, for a nap.

He could hear the house creak in the slight breeze, and the rattle of the pans she was washing, outside. He lay on the blankets, staring at the ceiling — and it hit him, like a delayed fever.

He felt completely alone, suddenly, completely alone for the first time. There was a dry, aching burn in him and he trembled like the poorly hung window in the west wall.

Weakly, he called out and heard her quick footsteps before

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the darkness came. . . .

It was a curious time. Rose was there, following him around, adoring him, and he was chasing her home, again. He saw his mother, saw her sad brown eyes, forever on her Bible, saw his big, blond father, coming home drunk, heard him singing, saw him throwing the packages in, first. The dress for his mother, the doll for Rose, the nickel-plated, four-bladed super pocket knife for Johnny.

"Hit 'em again, Anna, I hit 'em again. The dice know me, Anna baby, they know how hard I work. Are we unhappy, Anna? Are you going to scorch me, with that tongue?"

She never did. Maybe because he won, so often. Or maybe because she knew he had to have *this* sense of power, anyway. A man who spends six long days a week in the ditch needs some outlet beyond his home.

With the dice, he was a lucky man, Einar Larson. With the cards, he was no prize, but the dice did his bidding, more often than not. A big, hard working, happy man.

Until he'd gone back into the flat, to get Rose out, that night of the fire. Back up to the fifth floor to get his darling Rose. Neither of them came out.

How often had the building been condemned as a fire trap? And how often had somebody got to the right guy with the right price, to release the condemnation, again? There must be a record of it, somewhere.

No Rose, no Einar; Anna died. Wasn't Johnny enough? Evidently not. Anna died.

Thirteen and in the first year of high school, and he quit that to take Hymie Aaron's corner with the *News* and the *Trib*. Paid for it, out of earnings, and lied about his age, and got away with it. From the night his dad went in for Rose, Johnny had looked older than his age.

Well, that's water over the dam, and so was the rest. Now, he was Johnny Larson, with a bookful of blondes and a sweet Caddy convertible.

Only he wasn't. He was a sick man on a pile of blankets in the corner of a one room house on a hill.

He opened his eyes and saw Jane and asked, "How long?"

"Six days. You're past the crisis, now. There are some people, here, Johnny. They came yesterday."

"What kind? Men, women?"

"All men. One of them you know — a Nick Colias?"

"Nick? Nick was at Vialogo. He couldn't have —"

"He had a bomb shelter there, he claimed, and it must have been adequate."

"Bomb shelter? At the lodge? Nick never told me about that."

"It wasn't a very big shelter, I guess, Johnny."

Her face blurred, became clear, again. Her eyes were weary, her face thin and shadowed.

Then, Nick's hearty voice. "Johnny boy, my right hand. You're with us, again, huh, kid?"

Over her shoulder, he saw Nick, big and broad and dark, his dark eyes twinkling.

"Hello, Nick. Surprised to see you."

"*You're* surprised. I'm amazed. But it's Lucky Johnny. I'd almost forgotten how lucky you are."

"Who's with you, Nick? Some of the boys?"

"No, Johnny, they didn't make it. I got a Brain, though, Johnny. Oh, a bright, bright guy. M.I.T. man, and he's rigged up one of those code transmitters. We've been in contact with some spots around the country. There's people, yet. Maybe a hundred, even more. Nothing from Europe, though."

"Women, too," Jane said quietly. "Brave new world, maybe, Johnny."

Nick chuckled. "As soon as I saw her, I should have known you'd be around, somewhere, kid. If there's one dame left in the world, Johnny'd have her, I always said."

Johnny's smile was weak.

"We're getting things cleaned up in Portsville, Johnny," Nick went on. "This Brain of mine found a way to get gas out of those filling stations tanks, and we're burning what we can't bury. It will make a good base. Organization, that's what gets things done, huh, kid?"

"You're the man who can organize," Johnny agreed. "I want to talk to my — my nurse, Nick."

For a moment, suspicion darkened the broad face. Then Nick's white teeth gleamed in a smile. "Sure, sure, I get you, kid."

Heavy feet on the linoleum of the floor and silence. Johnny looked at Jane, and she seemed to be crying.

"Tired?" he asked

"I suppose that's it, mostly."

"Was I delirious? I talked a lot, I'll bet."

"You talked about your father and mother. And a Rose —?"

"My sister," Johnny said. "She died, as a kid, burned to death in a crummy tenement fire."

"Oh."

"My dad died trying to get her out. My mother died soon after that."

"And how old were you?"

"Thirteen, when my mother died. Why?"

"I just wondered."

"Look, why I wanted Nick to vamoose for a second, I want to — to tell you — I mean — thanks. You brought me through it, didn't you?"

She shook her head. "I was around, that's all. You brought

yourself through it, with your will to live."

He smiled. "We don't want to argue, now. You know, when it first came on, I got the damnedest feeling. Like I was — all alone, like there just wasn't anybody else — like —"

"I know," she said. "Don't talk too much. You're still weak."

"I'm all right. I'm fine. What are the others like, besides Nick?"

"There's a farmer, a Mr. Greene. And this electrical Brain of Nick's and a young fellow, who was out here on a hiking trip and a truck driver. That's all."

"Four of them, and Nick?"

"That's about it, the way you put it. He's the — what did you call it — the big wheel?"

Johnny nodded. "That's Nick. He's a great organizer."

"Try and rest. Don't think about anything."

"I'm not thinking. I'll let Nick do that."

"Try and rest."

He got up that afternoon. His legs were weak and his head a bit giddy, but he got out into the sun of the front yard and met the others, when they came back from the village.

Greene was a big, lank man, weather-beaten, bony, about fifty. The young man was Gerald Downing, a thin, intense, almost fragile looking lad. Pete Anconi was the M.I.T. gent, dark, short and square faced. The fourth man, the truck driver, was Al Schwartz and he was a lot of man, well over two hundred with forearms like a man's leg.

Johnny met them all and Nick said, "Used to be my good right arm. Once he's up and around, we'll really get this show on the road."

Pete Anconi smiled and said, "Nick's got us all out of the mental funk we were in. He's been a great — leader." Some emphasis on that last word.

Schwartz said, "I'll bet you were a promoter, hah, Mr. Colias?"

"More or less," Nick said. "Had a lot of — of varied interests."

Young Downing said, "We thought this would be an ideal place for the new — the new world." He said this quickly, as though it was important to get it out.

Johnny looked at Anconi, whose square darkness made him resemble Nick. Anconi and Colias, he thought, minority group Joes, as they say. One had gone into the rackets, and one into M.I.T. Why?

Jane said, "Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes," and went over to the fire.

Johnny looked at young Downing. "New world?" and a phrase came to him, "Brave new world? Why here?"

Downing looked at Anconi and Anconi answered for him. "So far as we've been able to tell, this is

one of the least affected areas in America. The water's still clean, and those who are still alive that we've been able to contact are willing to come here. We've mapped a route for most of them through the plague area rather than the blast area, because that blasted land is far more dangerous. We're going to have to set up some kind of government and begin training all the survivors in as many skills and fields as they can absorb or accomplish. We don't intend to go back to savagery."

Greene said, "For my money, I'd like something simpler than the civilization that's gone. But I'll abide by the others, on that."

Anconi frowned, but said nothing.

Schwartz said, "About all I can furnish is muscle, but there's plenty of it."

Johnny looked at Downing.

Downing said quietly, "I don't think it's nearly as important to preserve the mechanical gimmicks of our — former civilization as it is to preserve and record what was — worthwhile in its culture."

Anconi grinned. "I wouldn't argue with you on that, lad. But that would have to be your department. It's beyond me."

"And me," Nick said.

"And me," Schwartz said, "and Greene, too, I'd bet money. You know, with all this gab, we haven't decided what kind of government to set up."

"I can't think of anything wrong with the one we had," Downing said.

"I can think of a million things wrong with it," Greene said, "but maybe I belonged to the wrong party. I say, for now, a leader. I mean a real, strong guy who'll put out the orders and get some efficiency."

Downing seemed to be on the point of protesting, but Jane said, "Dinner's ready. Johnny, do you want to eat out here, with the rest of us?"

"I'm feeling a little dizzy," he lied. "Would it be too much if I had something in the house?"

She said, "Of course not. Help him get to the house, Pete. I'll bring something in to you, in a minute."

Gerald Downing came over to help, too, and Johnny put a hand on the shoulder of each man as he moved toward the house.

He hadn't been there more than a minute before she entered with a bowl of soup. "Invalid," she said. "I'm so glad you're — out of that delirium."

He smiled. "Have you been cooking for that whole gang?"

"Just since they came, and that was only yesterday, remember."

"They slept here, last night?"

"No. They've a place in town. Here, have some soup. Why all the questions, Johnny?"

"I don't know. How long have

they been in town?"

"For four days. Will you eat your soup?"

"My hands are kind of shaky. Would you —"

She looked at him in mock suspicion. "Your hands don't look shaky to me."

"I know. I — wanted to say 'thanks', again. Or maybe I just wanted to talk to you. Things are going to be all right, aren't they? There'll be a new world."

"I guess. What kind, though, Johnny?" She was feeding him the soup.

"The kind we make."

"The kind Nick makes, you mean."

He stared at her. "What have you got against Nick? He's just a natural — leader."

She said nothing.

"Look, Jane, there's nothing small about Nick. He's a big wheel." And then he stopped.

She nodded. "He's a big wheel nobody *elected*." She stood up. "Try and get some rest, Johnny." She went out.

Johnny lay there, thinking of the dream, thinking of the arguments he and Jane had had and thinking, for some reason, of young Gerald Downing.

He could hear them talking, outside, hear Nick's genial, persuasive voice. An operator, Nick was. Nobody but Johnny really knew what a smooth and apparently guileless operator Nick was.

He came in, before going back to town. "Awake, Johnny?"

"I'm awake. How's it going, Nick?"

"It's going too good, almost." The room was twilight dim, and Nick's squat form was outlined by the fire from the yard. His voice cut to a whisper. "Nicholas the First. How does that sound?"

"You been drinking, Nick?"

"Nope. Nicholas the First. Johnny, it's like destiny. I suppose you think I'm screwy, but since I was a punk in knee pants, I knew there was nothing too big for Nick."

"Relax, Nick. There are only seven of us. The others that are coming are going to —"

"They're coming *here*," Nick interrupted quickly. "Don't you see it, Johnny? What's the word that plough jockey used, that Greene? 'Abide' — that's it. He'll abide by what the others want, and so will the ones who are coming. They're coming into a *set-up*. How many are going to argue?"

"Not many. There won't be much fight in them. But what does this gang think of your — dream, Nick?"

"They're for it. They're not against it, anyway. Schwartz thinks I'm the right man, and you heard Greene. That Brain doesn't care what kind of government we have, just so he can work in peace. That — Downing, that punk, well — I guess I can take

care of him."

Johnny stared, shaking his head.

"And you, Johnny, won't I take care of you. You'll be my right hand, again."

"That's the best part," Johnny said. "How did you work it, Nick?"

"I let them work it out, with all their blather. Just a word, here and there, to keep the dialogue along the right lines. I was thinking and they were talking. I don't have to explain that to you, kid. You've seen me operate."

"I sure have. Lordy, there comes that dizziness, again. I've got to get some shut-eye, Nick."

"Sure, sure. I'll see you tomorrow. Maybe it would look better, Johnny, if the girl went back to town with us, huh?"

From the doorway, Jane said, "I'm staying here. He needs me."

Nick's chuckle was as coarse as any words he could voice. He said, "You haven't lost your touch, Johnny. See you tomorrow."

She stood there, in the doorway, until they'd gone. Then she came over to sit near Johnny. "Feeling better?"

"Much. That was just malarkey about the dizziness. I was getting sick of Nick's pipe dreams."

She said nothing.

"He must think he's Napoleon, or something," Johnny went on. "You think he might have a touch of the plague? There's plenty for all of us, plenty of everything."

"Everything but power, everything but people to command. Johnny, how blind are you?" Her voice was rough, husky. "Do you suppose for a second he can't do it?"

"Of course he can do it, but why? There's no reason to. There are stores full of things to be used, probably food enough for a million years. Cars, clothes, tools, everything —"

It was almost dark, now, and he could scarcely see her. She said, "Let's not talk about it. You're too weak to get worked up."

"Worked up? Me? Why should I worry?"

"That's right," she said. "You're alive. You're no bleeding heart. And next time, maybe Nick's bomb shelter will be big enough for two."

"Hell," he said peevishly, "why do we always have to argue."

"We don't," she said, and reached out to take his hand. "Johnny, there are times when I think you're almost human."

Johnny Larson, holding hands with a librarian. It was a new world, all right, a strange new world.

Later, after she fell asleep, he lay quietly, staring at the unseen ceiling, remembering the onslaught of the plague and that terrible, frightening sense of being alone. We die alone, he thought. All our

lives, we live with people, and then die alone. Rose and Pa — had they died alone? Or had Pa got to her? Ma had died alone, and for a long time after that, Johnny had lived alone.

Until he was big enough for blondes.

He listened to the sound of Jane's breathing, and then moved the blankets carefully. He didn't put on shoes, but stopped at the doorway, to make sure he had the keys to the car.

There was a full moon somewhere behind the haze, and it afforded enough light for him to reach the car without trouble. The door was open, and he didn't start the motor.

He'd brought the keys because he wanted to get into the glove compartment, and he always kept that locked.

In the morning, Jane said, "I suppose we might as well move into town, soon. The houses are empty, now, Pete tells me. And the town cleaned up."

"What's wrong with this place?" Johnny said, grinning, "It's hand built. Or is it because there's somebody to judge us, now?"

She returned his grin. "Probably. Chipper this morning, aren't you?"

"I'm a man with a purpose, now. We've a new world to build, lady. *After* I take my bath."

She studied him. "You've been thinking. You've been using that brain of yours."

"That's right. You know what I've been thinking?"

"That you're going to have your say in the making of the new world."

"Right. Hey, how did you know that?"

"Because I think we've got a new Johnny, too, since you were sick."

"Not completely, baby. It's the same model, but there've been some small changes. I just don't intend to get pushed around, *by anybody*."

"Including Nick?"

"Including Nick."

"You — weren't thinking of becoming the big wheel, yourself?"

"Why, Jane," Johnny said. "What kind of monster do you think I am?" His voice was mocking.

In town, that afternoon, Jane went back to the home she'd occupied as a boarder; Johnny chose a cottage near the heart of town. He worked under Pete Anconi, the rest of the day, getting things ready at the power house.

"Another reason why we think this is the logical spot," Pete told him. "They've their own power and their own water system. Most of these small towns get their power from Metropolitan. Self-sufficient and stiff-necked little town, this Portsville was."

"Thank God," Johnny said.

"Pete, have you heard anything from those who're coming here?"

Pete nodded. "There's a party of five cars, twenty people, who should be here this evening. They went through Deming, this morning, according to a lad I hear from, there. Eight women, ten men, and two kids, a boy and girl."

"I see. Did — you decide on a government, last night?"

Pete's smile was tolerant. "No. I kind of favor Nick's plans. Though it's not a word to use around hot-heads."

"Word?"

"Dictatorship. Don't flinch — there's another word to add to it, *benevolent* dictatorship. There's no doubt about it being the most efficient form of government, though it probably isn't the fairest. But it's a way to get things done."

"And Nick's — benevolent?"

"Isn't he? You know him. Promoter, wasn't he?"

"Racketeer."

"Oh. And — you worked for him?"

"That's right."

Pete smiled easily. "Conscience, Johnny? Or competition?"

"I don't know, Pete. I really don't know. I just got a feeling I want to get into the act."

Pete shrugged. "I never messed in politics. All I ever asked for was a chance to learn and work. Nick's promised me that." He picked up a wrench. "We'd better check the feed in that auxiliary tank. Wish I had a man who understood Diesels. I hope there'll be one in this party."

Dinner was in the assembly room of the Town Hall, that evening. Jane had prepared it; Gerald Downing and Al Schwartz would clean up the kitchen. Nick's orders, Nicholas the First.

Johnny looked them over, counting the house. Schwartz, Greene, Pete would ride with Nick. Downing and Jane, what kind of allies were they? And if it came to a vote, they were out-numbered.

Jane was bringing in the coffee, when Johnny said, "As soon as that first party of twenty arrives, I think we ought to have an election."

From the far end of the table, Nick looked sharply his way.

Johnny returned Nick's stare. "Don't you think so, Nick?"

"Election?" Nick shrugged. "Sounds like politics, Johnny. That going to be your rack — game, from now on?"

"It should be everybody's game," Gerald Downing said quickly. His voice was unnecessarily high.

Pete Anconi looked from Nick to Johnny, saying nothing.

Jane said, "Have you a better idea, Mr. Colias?"

Nick smiled at her. "I haven't given it much thought. I'm a great organization man, myself. Science and the farmer and labor and the

*"You can hold the election now. I've just killed a man."*

business man are what made America great, I always said. I don't put much faith in politics."

Gerald Downing laughed. "Science and the farmer and labor and the businessman. You overlooked me and Jane. You should have added 'and the student and the love of our women'. Then you'd have us solid."

Anconi smiled.

Johnny said, "And the racketeer — to include you and me, Nick."

For the briefest second, Nick froze. And then his geniality came back, like the mask it was. "Racketeer, Johnny? Just because I had a little income tax trouble? That would make us all racketeers, I'll bet."

Al Schwartz said, "That's for sure. All the kick-backs I used to get from the filling stations. Boy, those muggs in Washington were bleeding us white. If a guy didn't chisel, he didn't eat."

Pete Anconi said, "I don't remember any illegal deductions, but some of my best friends were guilty. You'll have to do better than that, Johnny."

Jane said, "This isn't Washington, it's Portsville. We don't need to assume the vices of a government because we adopt its virtues."

Greene said heavily, "Maybe the little lady could name one of the virtues. I've got a short memory."

Jane's chin went up, and she looked steadily at Greene. "I shouldn't have to tell a farmer about the biggest virtue. That was *freedom*, whether you remember it, or not."

"I remember it," Greene said, "and I can't see that I've lost it. Not yet, anyway, lady."

Johnny said, "Not yet, you haven't. But, of course, you boys don't know Nick. Not like I do."

There was a silence. There was a silence that reminded Johnny of the pre-Jane days, and there was a sudden recurrence of the plague's loneliness, and there was a quick, sharp memory of his dad going in for Rose.

And the remembrance that somebody had got to somebody, to keep that tenement the firetrap it was. In Johnny's mind, there was an abrupt and determined decision.

He said, "I'm not running for the office. I'm not good enough. And neither is Nick. We need an honest man, elected by all of us, or an honest woman. I think all of you will qualify for that, with the exception of Nick and me."

Johnny turned, to catch Jane's glance, and it was like holding hands, again.

Nick shook his head sadly. "To think my character reference would have to come from a man who's envied me since the day I put him to work. Everything he's got, including the Caddy, I gave

him. And still this envy eats him. Gentlemen, I don't want trouble. Until Johnny came, there was no trouble."

"That's right," Greene said. "You've sure got a point there, Nick."

Al Schwartz nodded agreement.

Pete seemed to be on the fence, but Pete was a man who loved peace. He'd had it, under Nick.

Johnny said, "There are twenty people due soon, including two kids. Before you make any decisions, think of the kids. And the others to follow. Maybe it's not important to you, to us, but it's going to be important as hell to the kids. We didn't earn anything better than we got; we haven't got the right to saddle them with anything worse."

Even Greene didn't protest, this time. Heart appeal, Johnny thought. If I could work in a flag curtain.

Nick's smile was sad, his brown eyes paternal. "Gentlemen —" he bowed to Jane, "— and lady, we've too much work to do to waste time quibbling. Basically, Johnny and I understand each other. I'd like to suggest that he and I go into the committee room and decide if we can't reach a compromise agreement."

"That makes sense," Greene said. "We've got to get along, *all* of us."

"Agreeable to you, Johnny?" Nick said.

Johnny nodded, and looked at Jane.

Fear in her eyes, and maybe she guessed. Maybe, with all her reading, she'd read about Nick's kind of people. She knew about the bomb shelter; she, alone of the group, had grasped the significance of that.

But she didn't know he was prepared, because she hadn't seen him go to the car, that night.

He and Nick rose, and Nick started for the door at his end of the room. On the way, Johnny paused to put a hand on Downing's shoulder.

He said quietly, "If things go wrong, you'll watch over Jane, huh, punk?"

Downing nodded, looked up, and managed a grin.

Nick was waiting, when Johnny got to the small, bare, committee room. He'd left his mask behind.

"You dumb bastard," he said. "What the hell kind of racket you trying to pull?"

"None. Maybe I got religion, Nick."

"Cut it out. The babe, that's it, huh? Trying to be a big shot for her. You can have her. Did you think I was going to move in on a wren like that? I'm not that hard up."

"I just don't think you'd make a good boss, Nick. It's nothing you'd understand. It's too big for you. And I don't think you're

going to be boss. I *know* you're not."

"Do you? You double-crossing blonde-chaser, you think I wasn't prepared for something like this? You think all I got is words and angles? You think there's *anything* Nick Colias overlooked?"

The thing in Nick's hand wasn't big, but it wasn't small enough to be overlooked. It was a .32 Banker's Special, a small gun, but big enough to put an adequate number of holes in Johnny.

Johnny smiled at it and said quietly, "I've seen you in corners before, Nick. I didn't guess you'd overlook anything. Got a little gadget here, myself, that's along the same lines."

It was a bigger gun, a service .45. It hadn't ever been used by Johnny, but it had been in his glove compartment since he'd first bought the Caddy. You never know, in Johnny's business.

Nick looked at it, and back at Johnny's smiling face. The smile was what must have slowed Nick. And the knowledge that the .32 had better hit bone or heart, because once that .45 started to blast, it made awfully big holes.

Nick looked at Johnny, trying to figure him, obviously. Finally, the smile found its way back to Nick's face. He chuckled. "What a sucker play. The only two hep gents in the whole known world, bumping each other off. There's a better answer than that, huh, Johnny? We can divide it up."

"We can elect a temporary leader, and abide by his decisions. But you wouldn't do that. You'd pretend you were, and keep working, looking for the angle, looking for the opportunity, waiting, smart and greedy. You know, Jane and I talked about a situation like this, and I think I had the only right answer."

"Well, maybe. I'm a man who'll listen to reason, Johnny. Especially if it means I'll live." Nick's gun was dropping toward his side, and Johnny automatically lowered his.

Then Nick's hand moved quickly, his finger tightening as he swept the little .32 back up. . . .

In the assembly room, they heard the shots, and all of them stiffened. Pete Anconi started to get up, as did Downing.

But the door from the committee room was opening, and a man came out, and into the larger room. It was Johnny.

His face was white, and he was holding his right side with one clenched hand. Blood dripped out from between his fingers.

He said quietly, "You can hold the election, now." His eyes were on Jane. "And then, I think, whoever's elected had better appoint a jury." He turned from Jane to face them all squarely. "I've just killed a man."

# UP THE MOUNTAIN OR DOWN

Homo Sapiens consider themselves to be the most advanced type of life in the Universe. But a higher type must exist somewhere! And how do such higher types regard us? How would we regard them? As master, or friend?

by
SYLVIA
JACOBS

"It's the Hitlerian concept of Aryan superiority! It's a dictatorship, an oligarchy! It's slavery!"

Paulson, the incoming administrator to the planet Tonga, had lost no time in demonstrating why he was called "Red." With that temper, and that shock of unruly hair above his flushed, raw-boned face, no other nickname would have fitted him.

The balding and bespectacled outgoing adminstrator, John Boich, was very patient about it,

considering that he had often gone through the same argument with traders and itinerant missionaries.

"It isn't any of those things," he said, "it's a social set-up peculiar to Tonga. There can't be any exact parallel on Earth, because Earth doesn't have two distinct, intelligent, indigenous species. Do you have to judge every intelligent race in the galaxy by the political standards of one insignificant biped on one measly little planet?"

"When people look and act as much like earthmen as these farmers and weavers you call low-Tongans, or *sholaths*, I say Earth standards apply. Didn't you tell me that the choicest products and the profits of these enterprises go to these high-Tongan creatures in the hills? Didn't you say that even the missionary-educated girl who is to be my secretary sends the money we pay her to help the Masters build up a hoard of Earth currency? A clean, alert, industrious race like this supporting a bunch of idle parasites! People as intelligent as you or I, classed as property! And worse, the property of some kind of cold-blooded monstrosities, so hideous they have to hide from earthmen! What do you call that but slavery?

"The trouble with you, Bolch, is that you've been here so long you've come to accept the status quo without question. All you go by is the rules — since these Masters don't violate the articles in the Space-Act prohibiting interplanetary traffic in humanoid slaves, you see and hear no evil. You figure you've done your job when you pass out a few agricultural bulletins with the compliments of Earth, and call the cops when some stray Earth trader gyps the Tongans."

"Now listen, my dear little blood-brother to the natives," Bolch interposed, "if you will calm down a minute, I will try to explain something. Slavery involves only one species. Certain individuals of a species owning other individuals, perhaps a color variant, of the same species. When two different species that can't inter-breed, are involved, the property species is considered a domestic animal. And there is no law of nature or the Space Act that prevents a non-humanoid race from owning domestic animals. You don't need to fight the War Between the States, and World War II, all over again. If you insist on an Earth parallel, pick one you can be objective about; ants owning aphids for ant-cows, for instance."

Paulson laughed, rather bitterly. "And what would you say was the I.Q. of an ant cow?" he asked, sarcastically. "You've had your turn, Bolch. As for myself, here is one domestic animal who

doesn't take kindly to the whip, when applied either to himself or his fellow-humanoids."

He was hoarse from arguing, and he went to the office water-cooler, a product of the local glass-blowing works, to get himself a drink of distilled water. Bolch, with surprising agility for his bulk, leaped out of his swivel-chair, and knocked the native-made paper cup out of Paulson's hand.

"What's the big idea?" Paulson demanded, brushing the spilled water off his trouser-leg.

"I just saved your life, that's all. You haven't been on this planet half a day, and already you've managed to arouse some Christian and normally peaceable native enough so he wanted to kill you. Maybe we should have put *you* into quarantine instead of your dog. Ideological quarantine."

"What do you mean, kill me?"

"Look closer at that water-bottle. See that flat, transparent, wriggling thing, like an animated cellophane ribbon? Deadly poisonous. The *sholaths* use them to kill mosquito larvae in stagnant ponds, and very rarely, for a kind of ritualistic euthanasia, to put some hopelessly insane fellow-*sholath* out of his misery. I gather, Paulson, that somebody on Tonga thinks you are nuts."

"What makes you think it was aimed at me? Either you or the secretary, Lalla, might have been the first to take a drink of water."

"It was aimed at you, all right. In the first place, Lalla and I know those cellophane worms are dangerous — you hadn't been here long enough to find out. In the second place, you have been shooting your mouth off, ever since you landed, and a lot of the *sholaths* who have been to missionary schools and churches understand English quite well. There haven't been any wars on this planet, for many generations. One *sholath* may get into a friendly fist-fight with another, now and then, but there was no serious discord, until you came along. These people have freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom from fear, and freedom from want — something Earth, for all her habit of telling other races their business, hasn't achieved yet. Then you come charging in, mounted on a white space-ship, determined to spear a few dragons, determined to end the disgraceful paternalism that has brought these things about. What do you expect?"

"Maybe one of those Master-creatures did it."

"I doubt it. Aside from the fact that they never come down from the mountains, have never been seen by any earthman, not even the Reverend Bowers, (who has been here since long before there was any such thing as an Earth

protectorate of Tonga) the Masters are said to have certain physical limitations. They can't do much for themselves, they need the physical help of the *sholaths* to survive, and the *sholaths* seem to think they need the mental help of the Masters to survive. My guess would be that some enterprising *sholath* thought up this cellophane-worm business on his own initiative."

"Well, whoever did it, I owe you a vote of thanks. In your place, I don't know that I would have bothered to save somebody who had been making so many insulting remarks about your administration."

Bolch smiled. "The only reason I stayed over till the next freighter, was to help you out in any way I could. Let me tell you something, Paulson. Any man worth his salt charges out to his first diplomatic post full of zeal and fervor. But sometimes he finds his pre-conceived notions have to be modified."

"This narrow escape hasn't scared me out of my basic convictions," Red declared. "I still believe that these people are quite capable of handling their own affairs, without dictation from a self-styled super-race, once this hypnosis, or whatever it is, is gotten rid of. But I've made a good resolution. I'm going to keep my opinions to myself, until I understand more about the situation, until I figure out what can be done about it."

"You learn fast," Bolch commented.

"But I've already stated my position in public, and I'll have to be on my guard."

Paulson hauled out one of his magnesium suitcases from under the desk, opened it, and took out what looked like a candid camera, which he hung by its plastic thong around his neck.

"Ever see one of these before?" he asked Bolch.

"New model camera?"

"New model, but not a camera, though that's what it's intended to look like. It requires no skill in marksmanship, you can shoot it even in pitch darkness. It aims itself by sweeping an echo-sonic beam. When the beam encounters something with more surface-hardness than living flesh, nothing happens. But an echo from flesh activates the trigger. I didn't know if I'd need it . . . now it looks as if I might."

"I never had any occasion to carry a gun here, myself," Bolch said, "but since one attempt has already been made on your life, I suppose you're entitled to protect yourself."

"This is still useless unless I recognize an approaching threat and turn on the sonics."

"Well, there's nothing that can warn a man of all dangers, the unpredictable dangers of an alien

planet."

"That's where you're wrong," Paulson said. "I brought along something that can hear danger a lot farther away than human ears, something that can smell where danger has been, something that will protect me, even while I'm asleep . . ."

"Oh, you mean your dog. I wondered this morning why you brought one along. Such a big one, too. Must have cut your baggage allotment down to next to nothing."

"Well, actually, I can't take credit for wise foresight. I didn't anticipate the need for a watchdog; I'd seen so much in your reports about Tonga being a peaceful place, no robbery and so on. But you see, owning a dog is a responsibility. You can't just leave him behind. Once I left Butch in a kennel for two weeks, while I took a trip, and would you believe it, the darned fool refused food the whole time I was gone; he was nothing but skin and bones when I got back. Barely had the strength to wag his tail."

Bolch laughed. "Oh, so you were just thinking about how the dog would feel if you left him behind on Earth! Never thought about yourself for a minute, did you? Never figured you'd be lonely here, that you'd miss the dog. Quit trying to kid me, Paulson. You're nuts about mutts."

"Butch isn't a mutt," Paulson said defensively. "He hasn't got papers, but he's eighty percent German Shepherd, and that's a dominant breed, in almost any cross. A vet told me that the crossbreeds are smarter than thoroughbreds, and my observations of Butch certainly bear that out."

"I stand corrected," Bolch said. "You show all the symptoms of a man who is nuts about *a* mutt."

"All right, whatever my motives, it turned out to be a pretty good move. I'll feel a lot safer when Butch is out of quarantine. When will they release him?"

"Well, actually, we haven't found any disease that earth-dogs can pass on to the native animals of Tonga, though we've had only a few instances to judge by. But it's policy to hold all incoming animals for twenty hours, one Tongan day, that is, to see whether they're vicious."

"Then I can't get him out before that native feast they're holding tonight in honor of my arrival?"

"You were going to take a dog to the feast?"

"Sure. I have a lot of faith in a dog's instinctive ability to detect what's edible. Suppose somebody tries to poison me again?"

"A native feast is the last place you need worry about poison," Bolch told him. "Tongan etiquette requires that the guests partake of each dish and beverage in the order of their arrival on

Tonga. The oldest *sholaths* first, then the Reverend and Mrs. Bowers, then the *sholaths* born since the Bowers arrived, down to the newest baby and the most recently disembarked arrival from outside. This is one place where the guest of honor is the last served."

"That's comforting," Paulson admitted, "but there's still a chance of slipping poison into a dish as it's passed to me. Butch's crate was unloaded before I got off the ship, so he ought to get to eat ahead of me."

"You make the rules about Earth freight around here, from now on," Bolch said, "but I'd advise you to have a better reason than your own convenience before you break precedent. If I were you, I'd quit worrying, unless you talk some more. You've had your warning, and I think they'll let it go at that, if you learn a lesson from it. The *sholaths* don't bear grudges."

"All right, your knowledge of the planet saved me once; I guess I can trust it again."

"I'll be eating there, too," Bolch reminded him.

"Who else will be there?"

"Practically everybody in town, it's a big event."

"Including that earthman in the turban, who was hanging around the spaceport?"

"He's the Buddhist missionary. No, he doesn't usually come to feasts. His religion is very strict about what he can eat."

"Somehow, I don't trust that man. I was wondering if it could have been that guy who tried to poison me, just now."

"Now, Paulson, don't get to imagining things, just because he's an oriental, and can't talk English."

"I guess you're right, I'm a little jumpy."

I'll show you your quarters, if you want to take a short rest before the doings."

"Good idea," Paulson said.

As they passed through the outer office, they saw the native secretary, Lalla, poring over an unabridged dictionary. She could almost have passed for an Earth human, but like all low-Tongans, was fragile and willowy-looking. The planet's slightly lower gravity might account for that. Her long, dark hair fell in braids, she wore the brightly-colored knee-length homespun shift that seemed to be a uniform for all low-Tongans, male and female. Her feet were bare. She looked up with a start, and flushed a little.

"Some day, maybe I learn all the words in the big, fat dictionary," she explained apologetically, "then I understand everything earthmen say."

Paulson glanced over her shoulder. It might be coincidence, but one of the words defined on the opened page was "domestic." He

decided to withhold judgment as to whether she had been eavesdropping. A desire to understand one's employer was a laudible enough motive.

"When I can speak Tongan as well as you speak English," he assured her, "I'll be doing all right. We'll see you at the feast."

"An English unabridged is a strange thing to find on Tonga," Paulson remarked, as they walked down the cobblestoned street, "I'd expect microfilm."

"It's one of the products of the Reverend Bowers print-shop and bindery. They even make their own paper from a local swamp-plant. They've also printed a Tongan translation of the Bible, a Tongan dictionary, several textbooks and hymnals, and two volumes of Tongan legends and history."

"The Tongans had a written language when the Bowers' came?" Paulson asked.

"A spoken language, augmented by incomplete picture-symbols. The Bowers rendered the native

words phonetically, in Roman characters. Before that, the minds of the Masters were the only storage-place of accumulated knowledge. The Seventh-Day Adventist missionaries have accomplished remarkable things with the natives, on every planet on the fringe. The Reverend is no slouch as a doctor, and has added to the local medical knowledge, besides learning a great deal about the diseases and herbal remedies peculiar to the planet, from the native medicine-women. Mrs. Bowers has introduced the *sholaths* to the idea of wearing clothes for purposes of modesty, and she taught Lalla her typing and shorthand."

Paulson smiled. "I remember sweating over the letters you microfilmed back to Earth headquarters, trying to make out the words Lalla didn't understand, and transcribed phonetically. Now I'll be signing them."

"Well, here's your domicile, ready to move in."

"Looks quite comfortable. I'm grateful to the Adventists, for making things so much easier for us, here, but one thing they forgot. They forgot to teach these people that it is their God-given right to be free."

"I thought you weren't going to antagonize the natives any more by criticising their customs."

"I'm not, when any of them are around to hear me, but you already know my position."

"I wonder whether *you* do?" Bolch said.

Paulson's adobe house was set far enough from the market-place to insure privacy. Red didn't feel like resting; his camera-gun still around his neck, he slipped off into a stand of trees behind the house. The chattering of a crowd of small arboreal animals stopped abruptly as he entered the shadows. He stood perfectly still, soon they became used to his presence, and began again to quarrel among themselves for the most comfortable crotches for sleeping-places during the approaching night.

They were about the size of squirrels, but had short tails, and large, circular ears. It seemed a shame to kill one of them, but the gun had to be tested, and would discharge only when focused on flesh. Paulson switched on the sonics and two seconds later, a furry little body dropped to the ground. He pocketed it; it would do for a meal for Butch tomorrow, to celebrate his release from quarantine.

The gun was almost noiseless, and made no flash; there was small chance that natives as far away as the market-place had been aware of the target-practice. But as Red turned toward the house, he caught a glimpse of a turbanned head through the trees. It disturbed him that the Oriental

had been spying on him, knew now that he was armed.

The dishes served at the feast, the hymn-singing and the demonstration of fire-eating, were all sufficiently earth-like to be unremarkable. Except for the two moons above, and a night too cold for a tropical latitude on Earth, Red might have imagined he hadn't crossed light-years.

Bowers proved to be an amiable and tolerant old man, far different from the rigid ascetic Paulson had half-expected. His ample wife looked as if a vegetarian diet agreed with her. Red soon felt so much at home with them that, when the *sholaths* had gathered on the other side of the fire to prepare for a dance, leaving the four earthfolk momentarily alone, he abandoned his attempt at noncommital trivialities and spoke what was on his mind.

"I don't know much about your Church, Reverend, but I do think I understand the basic Christian moral values. Do you consider the social structure on Tonga is morally right?"

"I suppose you refer to the Masters. I wonder whether you realize that they are not worshiped as idols. They are mortal, they are temporal authority on Tonga. They make no proscription as to the religion of the *sholaths;* we have four churches on the continents of Tonga, and countless open-air services every Saturday, the Roman catholics have convents and a monastery; these *sholaths* have been given freely by the Masters into the service of God. The Buddhists also have their converts here."

Paulson made a mental note that slave-owners on Earth also had permitted black slaves the release of religion, but said nothing.

"It is true that the Masters do not attend services, or study at our schools, but that is not what you may have thought it to be — it is fear. Mostly fear of the *sholaths* that their Masters, who are dearer to them than their own lives, may be hurt. It is the fault of traders who came here long ago, when the Masters lived in the valleys, and wantonly turned their tail-jets on an inhabited area, killing many. Were *those* the Christians, who had been born to the faith on Earth, or was it the *sholaths*, whom we then would have called heathen, but who sent these physically helpless beings to safety, at much sacrifice to themselves?"

"*Sent* them? I thought the Masters gave the orders."

"On many things the word of the Masters is law on Tonga. But when the safety of the Masters is involved, the *sholaths* take over."

Peculiar set-up, Paulson thought. It sounded more and more like some form of hypno-

tism. The only trouble with that theory was that these *sholaths* didn't act like people in a hypnotic trance. They laughed, they sang as they worked, they made love, they were full of vigor, and often noisy. It must be that they had been so thoroughly indoctrinated from infancy that they didn't understand the meaning of freedom. Paulson realized that he would have to learn more about the strange power these Masters exerted, more than any earthman knew, before he could know how to undermine it. He was moved, though he refused to admit it to himself, as much by a growing curiosity as by crusading zeal.

It was late when the feast officially came to an end. Though the Tongan day was shorter than an Earth day, Paulson was tired. He was still wary, however. He shone his flash-light into the adobe house ahead of him, later barred the door and shutters. It was cold as a tomb within the thick walls; he had not yet learned the trick of closing the shutters before sundown, to keep in the heat of the day. He lit the charcoal brazier sunken into the center of the packed earth floor, but in spite of that he shivered for a long time under his furcovers before he fell asleep. He slept with his weapon beside his bed, on a low stool.

It must have been some hours later when he awakened with a vague sense that someone else was in the house. It might have been his imagination but he thought he heard Butch barking, behind the stockade on the other side of the town. Paulson lay perfectly still, hoping his visitor would believe him still asleep, so that he could gain the advantage of surprise. The window opening opposite the bed showed the light of two of Tonga's four moons through the cracks of the shutters.

Paulson saw a shadow pass before the cracks of light, heard the pad of bare or soft-shod feet on the packed earth, heard the breathing of a man beside the bed. Stealthily, Paulson reached for his weapon. His hand closed, not on the camera-gun but on another hand that had grasped the gun an instant sooner. It was so unexpected that the other man was able to jerk his hand away before Paulson's grip tightened on it. Feet pounded on the floor as the other man, abandoning all attempt at quiet, broke and ran for the door. Paulson leapt out of bed and pursued him, catching up in the instant it took the other to unbolt the door. Just outside the door, in the full moonlight, Paulson made a flying tackle for the other's knees, and brought him down, sprawling.

It was the turbaned Oriental who had seen the gun's action in the grove of trees just before the feast.

"Four Earthmen on this whole

planet," Paulson said through clenched teeth, "and they can't even hang together!"

The Oriental didn't understand English, or pretended not to, but Red's anger was the same in any language. Paulson gripped the wrist that held the camera-gun, twisted it viciously. The Oriental made no sound, but his face turned to the moonlight, distorted in pain. He made no attempt to resist; it would have done him little good, in any case, for Paulson out-weighed him considerably. The camera-gun dropped to the cobblestones. Paulson let go the man, and made a dive for his gun. The Oriental broke free, ran for the trees. Paulson let him go. All he wanted was his gun.

Paulson lit torches and stayed awake the rest of the night. Tomorrow night, with Butch on guard, he would make up for lost sleep.

It took a week after Bolch left for Paulson to assemble sufficient trade-goods for his next step. A week by the calendar the Reverend Bowers had devised, dividing the Tongan year into seven-day weeks, with several odd year-days at the end, to come out even with the planet's orbital path. It took another three days to get a message back from the Masters, via one of the flying lizards the Tongans used as carrier pigeons.

Butch thumped his tail amiably on the floor as Lalla entered Paulson's office, without moving from his favorite spot under the desk

"The Masters say," Lalla translated from a thin slip of native-made paper, "you come to place where water hurry fast. Leave gifts there. Not go farther up mountain." She showed the Administrator the location of the waterfall, on an aerial map of the island-continent, which Bolch had photographed and assembled on the adobe wall.

Butch jumped up as if a flea had bitten him, and began snuffing frantically around the room. He found the leash Paulson had left on a chair, picked it up in his mouth, and carried it over, depositing it in Red's lap.

"How did *you* know we were going someplace?" Paulson asked the dog as he snapped the leash onto the collar. "I'm going over to the glass-blowing works," he added to Lalla, "to tell Alcto he can assemble the bearers tomorrow morning. Be back before lunch, if anybody wants me."

The train consisted of fourteen male low-Tongans, who were able to shoulder surprising loads, slight though they looked. There were also three females; the oldest, the Tongan equivalent of a physician, the middle-aged one, the expedition's cook; the youngest, Lalla, who was to act as an extra

interpretor. Alcto, the glass-blower, could speak English almost as well as she could, but Paulson had some unannounced plans in mind. He intended to push on beyond the waterfall, to the dwellings of the Masters, leaving most of the train behind, if they objected, which they were certain to do. Lalla, Paulson thought, might be easier to convince. Just how he was going to convince her, was not yet clear to him, but he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

Alcto looked Paulson up and down critically, then calmly removed the knives from Paulson's belt, and took hold of his rifle. Paulson didn't lose his hold on it. Butch growled a warning.

"Earthman take no weapons into country of Masters," Alcto explained.

"These are just in case we run into some wild animals," Paulson protested.

"Earthman take no weapons," Alcto repeated. "*Sholaths* have spears, plenty knives. Take care of animals. *Sholaths* let no harm come to earthman taking gifts to Masters."

For a moment, Paulson's red-headed temper flared, but he thought better of it. He still had his camera-gun; the natives were familiar with photographs, and had no taboos against such images. What was more important, he still had Butch. Without the dog, he wouldn't have taken a chance on travelling with an all-native train, not after his experiences with the cellophane worms and the Oriental who had hidden in the house.

"Oh, all right," Paulson said, letting Alcto have the rifle. Butch looked puzzled, but whatever was agreeable to Red was agreeable to him.

Once they were out of town, Paulson let Butch off the leash, and he ranged back and forth along the column, with a city-born dog's unbounded delight in the outdoors, snuffing happily in the underbrush. The first five days, he flushed only small game, and when he managed to catch something, he would place it triumphantly at Paulson's feet, expecting approval. Once the offering was the Tongan equivalent of a skunk, but Red bravely discharged his obligation to be effusively grateful.

The sixth day, when the column was only half a day's march from the waterfall that was their avowed destination, the earth-dog really hit the jackpot. Butch was just out of sight beyond a bend in the trail when he raised an awful uproar of baying and growling, interspersed with yelps of pain. Paulson sprinted ahead, rounded the bend, and saw that Butch had tangled with a formidable beast about the size of a hippopotomus. It was some kind of reptile, not

lizard-like, but more suggesting a gross nightmare of a tadpole. The bulbous forward end of the great body was sluggish, but the flat tail was long, active, and tipped with a murderous-looking stinger.

Butch had selected this lashing appendage as the most likely part of the beast's anatomy to get his teeth into. As Paulson watched, the flat of the beast's tail hit the dog a terrific wallop, tossing him ten feet into the brush. Nothing daunted, Butch got up, shook himself, and rushed back into the fray.

It was only a matter of time until the stinger would reach its mark and Butch would be a dead dog. Paulson whistled, but for once Butch failed to obey. The darned fool, Paulson reflected, had decided it was vitally important to eliminate this barrier across his master's path. In his concern for the dog's life, Paulson dismissed the consideration that the natives would learn he was armed. Circling till the big bulb of a body was between himself and the dog, Red switched on the sonics of his camera-gun. The great beast contracted into a tight ball, like a huge but unarmored armadillo. Butch was still yapping and slashing at it, but the beast was beyond resisting.

Paulson inspected the scratches Butch had suffered from the thorn bushes, and decided it would be better to let them bleed freely, rather than binding them up. He turned, to see that all fourteen of the male bearers had shed their burdens, and were standing in a rough formation around him, spears poised.

Red's hand paused in its involuntary motion toward his camera-gun. Deliberately, he put both hands in his pockets, and called his dog to heel. Butch was panting and bleeding from his recent encounter, but ready, if necessary, for another. The two of them faced the natives.

"All right," Paulson said, quietly, "now you know I'm armed. As we say back on Earth, so what? You're armed, too, aren't you? I'm willing to believe that your weapons are only for protection against animals; I'm asking you to believe that mine is for the same purpose. Neither *sholath* nor Master has anything to fear from me, so long as they do not deliberately attack me. But somebody tried to take this camera-gun away from me, once before, since I've been on Tonga, and it made me kind of sore. I'm keeping my camera-gun, and we're all going on."

Alcto, at least, got the general drift, and translated, while the bearers went into a sort of football huddle. Paulson held his breath, wondering whether he was going to get away with it.

Finally a figure separated from the group. It was the middle-aged

female cook. She was carrying a large and shining knife. Paulson tensed as she advanced toward him. Was it possible that the natives had appointed her for a suicide-mission on the theory that Earthmen were too chivalrous to shoot females, even females who stuck knives into them?

She stopped at the carcass of the dead reptile, kneeled, and began to cut steaks out of the great body. The action was so anti-climactic that Paulson laughed aloud in sheer relief.

When the cook had enough meat for the evening meal the bearers silently resumed their burdens and started again.

Paulson fell in beside Alcto, trying to get him into a conversation, but Alcto refused to reply. The whole expedition, in fact, was giving him the silent treatment. Even Lalla answered only in monosyllables to her employer's remarks.

They arrived at the waterfall toward sunset. It was a magnificent setting. The trees of Tonga, adapted to freezing cold every night, even in the lowlands, did not stop in any well-defined timber line, like Earth trees. They grew even on the higher slopes, among patches of perpetual snow. The thunder of the waterfall, dropping to the rocks below, could be heard long before they reached it. Paulson dipped his hand into the stream, and found it quite warm, suggesting that it had but recently emerged from underground reservoirs, heated by volcanism. The prolific plants along its banks had a tropical aspect, were of different species than any he had seen before on the trip.

The bearer who was carrying Paulson's personal camping equipment dropped it on a ledge overhanging the stream, some hundred yards below the falls. Then the native went on to join the other bearers, who were setting up their own camp above the falls. Nothing could have been plainer. The natives were silently informing him that, having violated a taboo, he was personna non grata, and could jolly well camp by himself.

That suited Paulson, so long as he had Butch with him. The bearers had neglected to leave him anything from the food packs but he could take care of that, too; he had seen fish leaping in the sheltered pools along the banks. He took hooks, line, and field glasses from his pack.

First he focused the glasses on the bearers' camp. All fourteen males were present and accounted for; Paulson felt safe from surprise attack from that direction. One of the females was missing; the elderly doctor-woman; he hadn't seen her since he had killed the huge reptile, in fact, but he dismissed it as a matter of no sig-

nificance. She had often before wandered off from the party, gathering herbs.

Paulson walked down-stream, and some distance from the pool he had selected as a fishing-hole he threw a stick into the water. Butch leaped joyously after it, making a great splash as he hit the warm water.

"Swim, boy," Paulson told the dog, "just what you need to wash the dried blood off your fur!" Butch seemed to understand him, and paddled around contentedly, though keeping one eye on his master as Paulson went back to his fishing-hole, settled himself on a rock, and baited his hook with some small crustaceans he had dug out of the mud banks.

It was a peaceful scene, as the man sat fishing, smoking a pipe packed with genuine tobacco he had brought from Earth. Paulson was pondering his next move. Apparently he had won his point about keeping his camera-gun, though he wasn't too popular with his bearers as a result. Some time before tomorrow morning, he would have to win another point, announce that he had never had any intention of turning back at the waterfall, from the start. The first parley of an Earthman with the Masters might not accomplish miracles, but at least the taboo which had thoroughly insulated them from the free worlds beyond would be broken.

Paulson saw Lalla walking alone downhill from the native camp, carrying something in a large mollusc shell. At the same moment, a big fish took his bait, and Red fought to land it. He was distracted by a muffled bark from down-stream, and Butch charged splashing out of the water. Before the dog could scramble up the slippery rocks at the stream's edge, something landed on Paulson's shoulders from behind, and rolled him half-way down the embankment.

It was an unfamiliar native, who wore a loincloth instead of the homespun shift of the bearers. His body was oiled so it was hard to get a grip on him. For all his slenderness, he was wiry, fast, and had the advantage of total surprise. Paulson's shoulder-slung camera gun was under his own back, where he couldn't get at it without first throwing off the native who had him pinned to the ground.

The native raised his knife, and it looked as if it might be all over with, before the bearers could get there, either to finish Paulson off or help him. Paulson grabbed the native's wrist, desperately pushing the knife away from his own throat. A bolt of furred fury leaped into the struggle, Butch's teeth closed on the native's upraised arm; the native howled in pain, his fingers opened, the knife dropped.

Quick to take advantage of the opening, Paulson threw the native over on his stomach, sat astraddle of his back, and trussed his hands and legs up neatly with the stout fishing line. By the time half-a-dozen bearers got there, Paulson had taken out his first-aid kit, and had cauterized the dog-bite on the squirming native's arm. No bones were broken.

Paulson faced the bearers calmly. They knew what the camera-gun was, now, knew he had them covered.

"Alcto, will you come here, please?" Paulson said, "Come on, I won't hurt you, if you don't try any funny business."

Reluctantly, the glass-blower stepped forward.

"Is this *sholath* from the dwellings of the Masters?" Paulson indicated his trussed-up attacker. Alcto nodded.

"Does he understand any English?"

Alcto shook his head.

"All right. Tell him I'm not going to kill him, that I have a message for him to take back to the Masters."

Alcto spoke a few words in Tongan. The native on the ground let out a relieved squawk, and stopped struggling.

"I want him to tell the Masters that I come in peace, if I am allowed to come in peace. I have broken the taboo about carrying weapons into the Masters' country, but no harm has come to this *sholath* on account of that. I am going to break another taboo — the one against earthmen seeing the Masters. But no harm need come of that, either."

Alcto looked startled, but translated.

"Have him tell the Masters I greatly respect their wisdom. I wish to sit at their feet (if they've *got* feet, Red thought to himself) and become wise. Also, I wish to tell them some things about Earth, so they may become wiser still. Tomorrow, I will visit them."

Alcto translated again, and Paulson retrieved the native's knife.

"Tell him I'm going to let him go. But tell him I have a gun, and it's loaded, in case he gets any more ideas."

Paulson kneeled and cut the bonds with the native's own knife. The freed native jumped to his feet, and darted toward the trees, without even pausing to chafe his wrists or inspect his bitten arm.

The bearers started back to their camp, muttering among themselves in Tongan, but Lalla remained. She kindled a small fire, and was broiling reptile steaks she had brought for Paulson. She had already given a raw steak to Butch, who was chewing on it with evident relish.

"You are very kind to a breaker of taboos," Red said.

"You are an earthman who wants to become wise."

Paulson smiled. Apparently, she had swallowed his placating-the-natives line whole, she actually believed that the Tongans had something to teach him. He was feeling pretty cocky, now that he was giving the Masters orders

Lalla put the seared steaks back into the shell, and handed it to him. Paulson sampled the meat cautiously. It was partially burned, but delicious. He discovered he was hungry enough to dismiss the thought of the repulsive beast the meat had come from

"Today, when you kill this *holthio*," Lalla remarked, "you say somebody on Tonga try to take camera-gun."

"Yeah," Paulson said, with his mouth full, "while I was at the feast, the Buddhist missionary hid in my house, tried to steal my gun in the middle of the night. What do you suppose he wanted with it? Those people don't believe in hunting, do they?"

"No want gun. Buddhist no kill. Afraid *you* kill."

"That adds," Paulson agreed.

Red threw the last bites of meat to the dog, who caught them and gulped them whole.

"You have tamed him well, for a wild thing," Lalla said.

"Why, Butch never was wild! Dogs have been bred for hundreds of generations, on Earth. They're domestic animals."

"Butch is your domestic animal? You are his master?"

"That's the accepted term, though sometimes I wonder which one of us is running which. I could have eaten the rest of that meat, you know, I was pretty hungry, but the way Butch looked at me, I couldn't resist him, though he'd had his share already."

"You say if you leave Butch, he will not eat, he die of grief. Today, Butch is afraid *holthio* hurt you, you are afraid *holthio* hurt Butch. If Alcto find out you have gun, he send medicine woman to tell Masters, *sholath* come to kill you. You know this, but you shoot *holthio* to save Butch. Tonight, *sholath* come to kill you, I see Butch help you. He would give his life to help you. Butch does not ask whether you are right, whether the one who attacks you is wrong."

"No, he doesn't," Red agreed.

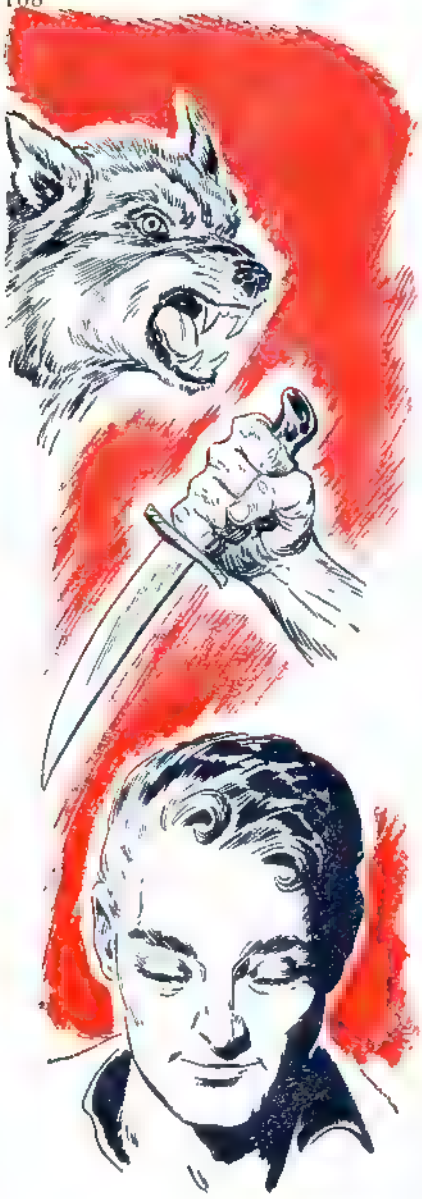
"You and Mr. Bolch call *sholaths* domestic animals. I think it is a good thing. A safe and happy thing, to belong to someone who is wiser. The *sholath* who loses his Master, will surely die of grief."

Red poked the dying embers of the fire, thinking.

"You have made me understand, Lalla," he said at last, "You have spoken for the *sholaths*. You could not have spoken better, if you knew all the words in the big, fat dictionary. In the office, it might have taken you years to get it through my thick skull. But on the trail, when Butch's life and later my own were in danger, you saw how it is between an earthman and his dog. You sensed the one possible common point of reference.

"You see, Lalla, there were once three earthmen called Hitler, and Stalin, and Mussolini. They were just men, like any others, but they wanted to dictate to everybody else. That was a long time ago, but earthmen still get mad at the idea of a self-styled super-race, one part of humanity making itself out to be better than the rest of us. We believe all earthmen are created equal. That I still believe, but there is a lot of territory it doesn't cover.

"We have learned to build space-ships, but our minds have not expanded with our spreading horizons. Sometimes we don't understand what we see on other planets, because we think we



know all the answers before we ever leave Earth. Nobody died of grief when they lost Mussolini and Hitler and Stalin, because the superiority of those men was only in their diseased, sadistic minds.

"But does that prove there can be no such thing as a species that is more intelligent, and better balanced emotionally, than homo sapiens? Does that prove that we are the supreme apex of all evolution? Of course it doesn't, but in my fuzzy way, I thought it did.

"You *sholaths* are so much like Earth-people, that I identified myself with you. I felt it degrading that you should subject yourselves to any beings. Now it has just dawned upon me that I was infected with the concept of homo sapiens itself as a super-race. I had caught a little of the Hitler virus myself, even while I was wrapped up in righteous indignation about it. My brand of it might be called anthropocentricity, but it is essentially the same thing.

"Another thing that made the Masters hard for me to take, was the reports about them being physically inferior to the *sholaths*. I didn't see how you could have genuine affection for such creatures. I imagined there must be some kind of evil, enslaving influence at work. Now I'm beginning to get a glimmer of the truth

about that, too.

"In a good many ways, a man is inferior to a dog. A man's sense of smell is so rudimentary as to be almost useless. The range of sound a man calls audible, is very narrow to a dog. A man has very poor teeth for hunting and fighting, he can't sleep in the snow without clothing, can't swim without being taught; man needs all kinds of artificial devices to make up for his weakness. He must look pretty helpless to a dog. But that only makes the dog want to protect the man. The dog recognizes the man's only real strength — his mind — he looks up to the man, and loves him, feels the man's approval is generous pay for any service.

"I lied to the *sholath* who came to kill me, Lalla. I said I wanted to sit at the feet of the Masters and become wise. But I didn't, I thought I was already pretty smart. I just wanted to teach *them* something. Let me tell you a secret, Lalla. Only in Butch's eyes am I infallibly wise. I'm not really such a hot candidate for a shining example of the most intelligent race in the galaxy. But this time it looks as if I'd learned something in spite of myself.

"If the Masters want me to visit them, I will go. If not, I'll accept that, too."

"The Masters do not want you to come," Lalla told him. "You will find their dwellings empty."

"How do you know that?" Paulson asked.

"I cannot say how I know. How does Butch know you think you go out, before you say it?"

"Very well, then. I will not force the Masters to leave their dwellings. Now that I've gained humility, I'm a little ashamed to leave this standard trade goods. To the Masters, it may look like a dried-up bone Butch digs up and proudly brings me. But I will pile the gifts by the waterfall, and go back. Go back and mind my own business. Earth business, that I understand. In time, I may even recover from this blow to my ego. It's perfectly logical, that homo sapiens shouldn't be the super-race of the galaxy, but that doesn't make it easier to take. We humans have been going around feeling superior so long, that the reverse idea is about as acceptable as a distillation of poison ivy, flavored with eau de quinine and perfumed with attar of skunk."

Next morning the column of bearers walked faster, relieved of half their burdens. Butch trotted at Red's heels. It was entirely immaterial to Butch whether or not Red was a member of the most evolved race in the galaxy. He didn't even care which way Red was going, up the mountain or down. All Butch wanted was to go along. That was enough to make him happy.

# REWARD for VALOR

## By MARK CLIFTON

**Some say heroes are born, not made, but newspaper men think differently. To them a hero can be made out of printed words. MacNab was a hero, but somehow the newsmen never got around to saying the words.**

*THE nose of the shuttle is still pointed upward, away from Mars. Around us there is only the black and emoty reaches of space. We are headed out toward the stars — in a leaky old shuttle hardly able to lift against the light gravity. There will come a point when the nose will falter, level, turn downward. The gravity will win. We will streak Marsward — faster — and faster —*

"I'll need a ticket for the shuttle back to Marsport," I said to the old fellow who ran the Trading Post. Old Sam looked me over in the manner of country folk, pointedly unimpressed, and without hurrying he came from around the counter.

To further show how unimpressed he was, he stopped at a pile of cured hams beside the candy counter, where peppermint sticks and round lemon drops were displayed through the glass.

I walked over to him and pulled my government pass from my in-

side pocket. He looked at it, without touching it, and looked at me again. Indifferently, he walked over to the open doorway and spat a stream of dark tobacco juice out into the bare yard

The nearby patches of lichen on the ground shot out tendrils to bury roots into the moisture before it evaporated in the thin, dry air. He walked back again, still in no hurry, behind the counter.

and down to a partition. He went through a door in the partition, and stood behind a wicker window marked, *Slag Hills Transit System.*

"Can I help you, stranger?" he said through the window, as though he hadn't seen me before.

"Yes," I answered. "I said I want a government pass ticket back to Marsport."

"You mean you want a free

pass without paying for it?" He peered at me through watery yellow eyes, and ran his fingers through his rusty, gray hair.

"You'll get your money," I answered, a little shortly. "The government redeems the tickets. You must know that. I'm not the first inspector who's ever been through here."

"Sure I know it," he answered. "I know I got to wait weeks, maybe months for the money. Meantime, you get the service today. Like everything else about the government," he was grumbling half to himself now, "A man is expected to jump when the government snaps its fingers, but he can wait for his own rights."

He handed me a ticket which looked as if someone had worn it in his shoe as a bunion pad. Under the dirt it said, "Free Pass — Government" on it. Even the printing seemed contemptuous.

"When is the next shuttle due?" I questioned. It seemed a normal thing to ask, but old Sam took exception to it.

"Appears you want a lot of service on a free pass," he commented. "Always the way. Them that has to pay, takes what they gets and puts up with it. Them that gets it for nothing are mighty particular."

"There's nothing particular about wanting to know when I can get out of here," I began hotly. Then I checked myself. "Careful boy," I said to myself, "Government men are unpopular enough as it is, without you adding to the injuries."

"I mean," I amended, "I'm going to catch hell from the government if I don't get back to Marsport on time."

"Thought you was the government," he said, and looked up at me closely again.

"I just work for it," I answered. "It doesn't treat me any better than it does you." And that isn't the half of it, brother. You'll never know.

"Fancy that," he commented seriously. "Well, the boys up at the mine told me you wasn't as nasty as most inspectors. Reckon maybe so. Too bad you work for the government, son. You could be mighty nigh human in spite of being Earthborn."

"I didn't ask for the job," I said. "I was drafted into it. People on the Earth don't like the government any better than you do. They'd never get enough employees if they didn't draft them."

"You mean there's still decent people left on Earth? Been so long since I visited there, I kind of got into the habit of thinking everybody on Earth was a government man living off us Colonists."

He dropped the conversation, when I didn't comment, and went to the back of the ticket office cage. He ran a long and dirty fingernail down a stained sched-

ule, and then came back to the window where I waited.

"Next shuttle's due today," he said. "We ain't had one for nigh a week. Yep, ought to be due today — or tomorrow — or the next day for sure. This is the end of the line, and if nobody's coming out here, sometimes they don't come all the way. Depends who's on it. One of the ordinary shuttle bums, and you can expect it when you see it coming. If MacNab's on it, you can expect it when it's due — maybe today."

*As simply and easily as that, my fate was introduced. MacNab, the cause of my death — and the restoration of my life. You brought us up all wrong, grandfather. You taught us that honor and truth were important. You taught us to search for them, and never stop searching. Had you any realization, grandfather, how old-fashioned you were? How rare they are? How lonely a man can be who cannot settle for less? Perhaps you did, for it is a tremendous thing to have found them — and of all places, in an old shuttle bum.*

"What's so exceptional about MacNab?" I asked.

"As a trusted employee of the Slag Hills Transit System, I ain't in the habit of gossiping about my fellow workers," he reproached me. "Anyhow, I'm closing up the ticket office until further notice."

He pulled a mesh wire grate over the window and fastened it from within. He came out of the back door of the cubby hole and around to a counter where coveralls and respirators were piled on a table.

"I heard you ask the ticket agent about MacNab," he said, without so much as a twitch of a smile.

I did a short double take. I couldn't tell whether the old bird was Mars happy, or kidding me. I played it straight.

"I hear he's pretty dependable," I said.

"You ain't been around much, have you, son?" he asked. "But then, I reckon you wasn't even born when MacNab was the top space pilot in the whole solar system."

"Funny," I commented seriously. "If he was so great, you'd think I'd have read about him somewhere — studied about him in school or something.

"He didn't get the breaks," the old trader commented. "Why, I remember the time he spent two years flying a two man ship out to Saturn and back. The navigator guy with him went space crazy — one of them sly kinds of crazy — and MacNab didn't realize it until they was smack dab in the middle of Saturn's rings. For twelve days, without any relief and a crazy man on his hands, MacNab nursed that ship through the debris until he could slow

down enough to turn and get out of it. Hand operated. There wasn't no automatic meteor shields in them days."

"Whew!" I said. "That was quite a feat."

"Bravest, most stupendous thing a man ever done, as anybody knows who knows the Saturn rings," he agreed.

"But I've never seen any mention of it."

"Yeah," Sam said drily. "You never seen any mention of it. With a crippled ship and a crazy loon for a partner, he made it back to earth. Two years of continuous, superhuman strain. He got a one paragraph mention on page thirty-four."

"But why?" I asked in bewilderment.

"Happened about that time, the World President's young wife got caught in a scandal — a dilly of a scandal." Sam chuckled gleefully at the memory. "Most of the newspapers were opposition owned, and the scandal didn't get hushed up. MacNab landed on the day the news broke. As I said, he made a line mention on page thirty-four."

He walked over to the doorway and let another stream of tobacco juice fly.

"Been neglecting them plants over in the upper right hand corner of the yard," he commented in explanation. "Wind usually is against me. For as little air as we got here on Mars, it sure does move around an uncommon lot."

I waited.

"About MacNab," he resumed. "Another time he stood off a whole tribe on Callisto singlehanded. Wound up making the chief sign a trade treaty with Earth. Opened up the whole daggoned moon to trade, it did. Diamonds big as your fist there. That alone was enough to make a man famous for life."

I knew of the Callisto diamonds. I could agree.

"Only that time there was a pickle manufacturer's son cut his finger. With a toy knife or something. The pickle baron saw his chance to get some fancy advertising. He spent a couple million on that boy's cut finger. A couple of million, put down in the right places, to the boys who decide what to print and how to feature it, gets a lot of attention, son.

"The entire Earth lived from hour to hour, waiting for the doctors' report on how the cut was coming along. Would there be an infection? Would his whole arm drop off?" Sam snorted with disgust. "A joint session of World Congress was held to discuss whether the bandages ought to be changed or not. You'll always find the politicians where you find the publicity, son. The manufacturer opened up thirty-seven new pickle factories and still couldn't keep up with the demand. He made a bil-

lion."

Could the old man be pulling my leg? Somehow I doubted it. There was the ring of sincerity, of honest indignation. And too, I well knew that the measure of heroism is determined by the open news space, or somebody thinking it's time to get the people hopped up over something.

I didn't need the old trader's punch line, but he gave it anyway.

"MacNab landed on the day the bandage was to be changed. He done better though. He made page twenty-nine, this time, and two paragraphs. Some of the jeweler trade papers featured the story about the diamonds, but they didn't think to mention MacNab." He sighed.

"It went on that way," he said. "MacNab probably did more to open up the solar system than any other man, living or dead. But nobody ever heard of him. He always came in on the wrong beat of somebody else's publicity. Even in the companies he worked for, it went the same. The company wheels always just happened to be looking in another direction. You play poker, son?"

"A little," I answered, although I couldn't see the connection.

"You ever have a streak, no matter how good your hand, somebody at the table can always nose you out?"

"Sure," I laughed. "If I have two pair, he's got three of a kind. If I've got threes, he's got a straight. If I've got a straight —"

"That's MacNab, son. And the wonder of it is, it never soured him. At least, not to notice. He ought to be one of the Mr. Bigs, instead of a back hills shuttle bum. But he keeps right on, just the same. I wonder about such a man. If maybe he don't get real hungry for space, and doing big things. If inside he don't grieve about things. I wonder about MacNab, son. I wonder a lot."

He fell silent, staring at a shelf of canned concentrates. I walked over to the doorway, and stared off across the bleak and monotonous landscape.

"Trouble with MacNab," the old man resumed to my back, "he don't talk about himself. If he'd been a blowhard and a bragger, maybe sometime when news was dull, they'd have picked him up and made a hero of him."

"Could be," I answered.

"But he don't talk. He's been on this run for over two years, and I'll bet he ain't never said fifty words to me. But then, none of us old timers like to talk. I reckon you noticed that."

I grinned out into the landscape, and didn't contradict him. I spat out into the yard at a particularly dry looking lichen. I felt a little sorry for it, and thought I could spare that much moisture. It leapt upon the spittle as a starving cur upon a juicy bone. I

almost felt it waggled its leaves at me.

The old geezik came up behind me and looked at the plant.

"That one has been in the dog house for being too greedy," he commented. "But I reckon it's had enough punishment." He looked at me closely. "It likes tobacco juice better," he said reproachfully. "Long as you was giving it moisture, looks like you might of flavored it a little."

"By the way," I asked. "Do you carry stamps?"

He changed character on me again.

"I was just about to open up the post office," he answered. He went over to the other side of the store and opened a window by sliding back a panel.

"Did I overhear you telling the store clerk you wanted to buy some stamps?" he asked out the window.

"Yes," I answered. "And, postal clerk, how does it feel to be a government man?"

"Why you — you —" he blurted angrily. Then he began to chuckle. "You got me there, son, fair and square. First time I ever realized I was a government man. Maybe they're not all Earth lice after all."

"Depends on which window you're looking out of, doesn't it?" I grinned back at him.

*The air is getting foul and thin in here. I can hear a faint, high whine, almost beyond hearing range, where the air is escaping through a tiny hole into space. There is a good chance our bodies may never be found. If we crash near lichen, the moisture of our bodies will cause us to be consumed within minutes. I realize I am writing this to fill in the time, rather than to leave a record. Somehow I seem to have been filling in the time all these years, waiting for life to begin, for something real and vital to happen. Now I fill in the time waiting for death.*

When space liner life rafts fail to pass inspection for deep space, they are sent to such places as Marsport and sold into suburban commuter service. They serve the poorer sections, of course. And if the ship has a little air leak, a spotty firing mechanism, a burnt rocket chamber, there is probably only discomfort to the passengers. There seldom is real disaster.

And when there is, the surviving families can always write a protest to the government. They sometimes receive an answer, too — form Xa758693 — telling them there is a committee studying the problem. This letter has served satisfactorily for the last twenty years or more. There may even be such a committee — political favorites have to be hired somewhere.

When the ships become even more defective and maintenance begins to eat up the profits, they

are shifted farther back into the smaller towns and feeder lines. Finally they wind up as spur shuttle service from the mines and trading posts to the trunk lines.

The same route is followed by the space pilots, and often simultaneously. With wry amusement, and some pity, one can fasten the classic recommendation upon most of these old boys. They are good men — when sober.

In times past, I often wondered that these old boys thought about — the boys who had explored the vastness of space by the seat of their britches — and now piloted ore shuttles. I wondered what MacNab thought about, what hells and tortures he went through as he saw himself dropping from ace pilot down a notch, another notch, and still another. I wondered if he had a sense of failure, of somehow missing the goal of high and noble purpose — a grief to match my own.

There was no question but that his had been a life of valour, unrecognized perhaps, but nonetheless very real. In a less spectacular sense, had mine?

*Grandfather, the rewards for honor and integrity, for striving always toward nobility of the spirit, not ever counting the cost if right be involved — those rewards have not come to me.*

I could have liked MacNab when I met him back there in the trading post. But there was something about him aloof from like or dislike. Others might have classed him as nothing more than an old shuttle bum, but I felt the glamorous aura still about him of the old space pilot — the real space pilot and not the glorified truck drivers of today.

Nowadays, a pilot presses a button at the beginning of the journey and another button at the end. Automatics handle all the rest. But in MacNab's day, pilots searched the black reaches of space as endlessly and anxiously as the ancient mariners searched the sea. Space crept into their eyes, and back of their eyes, and never left their eyes again. And when one looked into those eyes, one somehow looked into the depths of space.

*Is this to be my reward, grandfather? To be able to recognize valour when I see it, without being told by a publicity man that it was there?*

I was the only passenger scheduled. MacNab punched the button to close the doors of the shuttle after I had thrown my luggage aboard.

He had the barest words for me, and those given grudgingly. He was tall and slender, with gray hair still thatched thick upon his head, and coming out of his ears and nostrils. Scotsmen do seem to run to hair growth as they

get older. His uniform was surprisingly neat and meticulously patched. There was no sign of the Venus weed twitch, the Moon dust squint, the Martian chemo vein burst, the Earth alcohol eye glaze.

But my job was not to wonder about people. My job was to interpret and enforce government regulations. I sat down in the nearest seat and took out a sheaf of new regulations. I tried to make sense out of the gobbledegook in which the regulations were written.

I pulled an analysis sheet out of my briefcase to parse the sentences of the regulations. Maybe if I could separate the clauses from the phrases, I could begin to grasp the idea. Hell — I couldn't even find a subject or a predicate. The boys who wrote these regulations should go far.

I found myself wondering if the mine I had just inspected really would destroy the explosives I had condemned. I wondered if the company would consider the cost of the condemned explosives to be of greater value than the lives of the men it employed and use them anyway.

I found myself wondering why MacNab didn't start the ship. He seemed to be pawing at levers and jabbing at buttons. Why didn't he take off?

I went back to the regulations. The first sentence had thirty-two phrases in it. I got as far as determining that phrase seventeen modified the meaning of phrase three, and in combination with phrase twenty-five it nullified three entirely.

Well, there was the expected loophole, the invitation for graft. I knew what I was supposed to do. For a price I was to point out the loophole to the companies I inspected. Then a later inspector would come around and impose a stiff fine upon the company for noncompliance with the regulation. The fine would be split among the attorneys, judges, inspectors, and others involved in the deal.

The companies like it that way. Although they may have to pay a fine of a few thousand, they get the chance in the meantime to bilk the public out of a million. The officials on up the line seem to like it, because the inspectors who cooperate always get the choice assignments.

Everybody seems to like it, except me. I have to be contrary. I have to be honorable. I get the stinking back hills assignments because of it, where there isn't much money to be had anyway.

*You didn't do right by us kids, grandfather. You should have let us grow up with an attitude to fit our own times, instead of giving us a set of standards out of a world which is dead and almost forgotten.*

I looked up again from my attempts to understand the regulations. MacNab was out of his seat and had the floorboards of the pilot cabin up. His head was buried down among the activators. The seat of his britches showed the neat stitches of a large patch. I saw one smeared hand come up and lay down a wrench. It fumbled around for a screw driver. It picked up the screw driver and returned into the hole.

I looked out of the quartz window, expecting to see the bleak landscape. But something of interest had arrived. A private space yacht was landing near the trader post. Across its side was emblazoned the word, *Press*. That word would get it through where even high officials would be stopped. Everyone knew the tremendous power of the press. A vindictive reporter wielded more power than a king.

Idly, I watched the ship settle to the ground. I saw the doors open, and two men come out. One of them was burdened down with photographic equipment. The other bore the arrogant stamp of the reporter who had to answer to no one except his editor. His slightest whim could make or break an individual, or a company. Back in the twentieth century they had begun the semantic loading of news releases with personal policy and prejudice. Now the straight reporting of facts was entirely forgotten.

They went into the trading post. I went back to the gobbledegook. Whatever he was here for, the reporter could not hurt me. I was already the lowest scum, too small to interest him at all

The next time I looked up, MacNab was sitting in the pilot seat again, trying out the buttons and levers with patient resignation

"Won't it start?" I called out to him. All right, it was a stupid question, and I knew it, but I felt I should show some interest.

MacNab didn't feel called upon to answer. From the sudden set of his neck and back, I could see he was forcing himself not to answer. I suspected he was past all words. Apparently he regained a measure of control.

"You might as well go back to the trading post," he said slowly. "I'll call you when the ship is ready to move."

It was no more comfortable in the trading post than in the shuttle, but perhaps my presence bothered MacNab. I left my luggage where it was, along with my briefcase. MacNab let me out the door and I walked around the Press yacht and back to the store.

The photographer was lounging indolently near a stack of canned peaches. The reporter had old Sam back in a corner, talking to him.

"But there's got to be something

around here worth a feature story." There was a spoiled petulence in his voice. "The boss said get a feature story about a back hills mine. Don't ask me why, but by damn if there isn't a story here, I'll make one."

He stuck out a square chin in a bellicose pose of a fighter who hadn't yet learned the feel of an opponent's fist. His whole face was a shallow mask of unfeeling arrogance. There was no sensitivity around his eyes or mouth. To him, beauty would be an exercise in semantics, deliberately false, measured in column inches.

Old Sam was responding with truculence and stupidity.

"I don't know anything to tell about," he was mumbling contrarily. "We just mine Dural ore and that's all there is to it."

"But my damn," the reporter shouted, as if trying to get through the wall of stupidity by volume of voice. "Aren't there even any colorful characters? What the hell do men come to work here for? Something must drive them here. A sane man wouldn't come out of choice. Hell, give me a man — any man — and I'll *make* a story out of him. I gotta have something!"

"What about MacNab?" I heard myself asking. I could have kicked myself, because I had intended to stay out of it.

The reporter whirled around.

"Who are you?" he asked belligerently, "who asked you to stick your nose in?"

"He's a government inspector," Sam replied. Then defensively, "And a decent one."

"Oh," the reporter grunted the word contemptuously. His lip curled and he stared insolently at me. I was more polite. I kept my lip straight when I looked back at him.

"Who's MacNab?" he asked, after his look had put me in my place.

"MacNab is the man who conquered Callisto single handed, and opened up the trade in diamonds," I answered hotly. Then I rushed on, "MacNab is the man — the only man in history — who nursed a ship on manual control through the rings of Saturn — back in the days when there weren't any meteor shields."

I heard a step behind me, but I thought it was the photographer.

"Is that something important?" the reporter asked insultingly.

"Important —" I felt my anger beginning to get out of control. But I was interrupted by a quiet voice behind me.

"No," the voice said quietly. "It wasn't important."

I whirled around and saw MacNab standing behind me. His flesh was pale, and the planes of his face were frozen into a slender mask. Even the reporter was abashed by the quiet dignity.

"What I mean is —" the reporter

faltered. "Well, if it really was important — but then, you see it happened so long ago — well, you certainly couldn't call it news — but —"

"It wasn't important," MacNab repeated with finality. Then he turned to me.

"I've got the ship firing," he said. "We can leave now."

I started to turn and follow him out, when there was a low rumble, then a roar — the devastating roar of the world coming to an end. The frame building of the store shivered and trembled as if a gigantic hand was shoving it around.

"The mine!" old Sam gasped in a shrill, bleating voice.

"Those explosives!" I yelled an answer.

All of us were running for the door. The photographer was blocking it with his equipment. I was able to feel a faintly malicious taste of glee as I pushed him, hard, to one side and plunged through. MacNab was directly behind me, running fast.

We rounded the corner of the building, and saw the open shaft of the mine entrance in the hill back of the store. Smoke and dust were pouring out of it, and I saw the figure of a man stumbling through.

"Faster," I gasped. "Oh, those fools That condemned explosive!"

The reporter had caught up with me now, and MacNab was drawing ahead. Far behind, the photographer and old Sam were running as best they could; the one handicapped by equipment, the other by age. MacNab didn't seem to know his age. He was drawing farther ahead of us — running lithe and straight as a lad.

"What about the explosive?" the reporter gasped as we ran up the rocky slope toward the mine entrance.

"I condemned it," I gasped back between breaths. "Damned owners — must have tried — to use it up — all at once — before I could turn — in my report."

We were close enough now to hear the faint, hopeless screams of men down in the darkness of the mine. MacNab, running strong, shot into the black entrance before the reporter and I had even reached the level at its mouth.

There was another roar of explosives letting go.

We faltered. I remembered MacNab was in the mine. The rest of the miners might be unreal figures, statistics to be read about in the newspapers, but MacNab was something else again — a human being. One of the few I'd ever met.

"Come on," I shouted to the reporter, who was hanging back.

I rushed into the entrance of the shaft and heard him coming behind me.

It was as if I rushed into a crashing, roaring blackness. I knew

nothing more.

There is an unreality about partial unconsciousness. One hears sounds, and dimly sees hazy sights, but they have no connection with one another and fit into no pattern, until later, when one reasons them out. Seconds stretch into eternity, and eternity collapses into seconds.

I was dimly conscious of rushing feet. I remembered seeing MacNab pass by me, again and again — going toward the light with a man across his shoulder, going back into the blackness for another, gasping and sobbing for breath — but going.

I remembered lying there, unable to move, to pull myself together, mentally cursing myself for not helping, for being a waste. So typical of me.

I became conscious of a raving, a shouting near my head — the bellowing bawl of a brat who has stubbed his toe and thinks he's killed. The cobwebs cleared a little more and I realized it was the reporter. That strange sense of time we have made me realize that ten, maybe fifteen minutes had passed.

I turned myself over and sank exhausted and prone to the rubble floor of the mine. I rested another minute. The bellowing bawl became louder and my mind cleared more. I pushed myself up to my knees and hands, my head hanging down. The weight of the world was on it, but I lifted it far enough to look over at the voice. The reporter was caught under a timber. There was another timber, partly supporting it. Even then, I knew the reporter wasn't badly hurt.

The timbers must have shaken loose after the last explosion, knocking me out with a glancing blow, and pinning him beneath them.

I tried to stand up, and after an age I found I could make it. My knees were shaking, ready to crumble, and I was sick with a terrible nauseating sickness, but I made it. I staggered over to the timber and began to tug at it. The reporter was shrieking at me.

"Lift it, you fool! Don't drag it! Lift it!"

"It's too heavy," I gasped. "Next time I tug on it, slide out from under it."

I tugged upward. He slid. The weight was too great. I had to let it down again. He screamed.

"You're crushing me!" But I could see the bottom timber still held up most of the weight.

I tugged upward again. He slid again. This time he slid all the way. I dropped the timber and went down on top of it. I felt myself blacking out again. Faintly, I heard the reporter cursing.

"Damned senseless fool. You tore my pants!"

I was glad I couldn't hear anything more.

The next time I came to, I was outside the mine shaft, and old Sam was bending over me, squeezing a moisture bulb into my mouth. All about us were groaning men, bleeding, suffering — some staggering about, some lying supine — some courageous, some afraid. The lichen plants had been cleared away to keep them from shooting tendrils into the open wounds. The fat-butted mine owner was crouched over to one side, his back up against a rock, and with one hand squeezed tightly around the stump of an arm.

I felt an unworthy rush of gladness. It is so seldom the instigators of such actions get caught up in their own greed. It's usually poor devils who can't help themselves.

The reporter was standing at my feet.

"Holy damn," he was saying over and over. "What a story! Holy damn! I wanted a story and I got it." He laughed loudly. "I'll have to compliment you stinking Martians. You're damned obliging!" He looked around the scene of suffering men triumphantly. None looked in his direction.

I pushed Sam away and sat up.

"Doctors?" I questioned.

"On their way," Sam answered. "I sent a radio call from the mine office. Due any minute now."

I looked over at the mine owner and felt a little regret. Somehow, I wished he could be made to suffer more, to know all the suffering he had caused. But it probably couldn't be helped. He'd be rescued, too, when the doctors came. It was a pity.

I felt unworthy for my regret, because there were a dozen men writhing in agony, while I wasn't really hurt. There were three men lying very still. They would never know pain again. I felt another rush of anger in my head.

"I don't condemn explosives for the fun of showing my badge!" I shouted senselessly at the mine owner. He did not look in my direction.

"Damn!" I shouted. "Damn all greedy humans anyway. I'm sick to death of humans. I'm goddamned ashamed I was born a human!"

Old Sam started rubbing my head between his hands, palms over my temples, massaging evenly.

I shook my head and came out of it.

"What's the use?" I groaned. "Oh, what's the use?"

The reporter was still standing at my feet, looking at me. His face was alive with a scheming delight.

"You saved my life, fellow!" he shouted at me.

"Nuts!" I answered disgustedly.

"You saved my life!" he shouted again. "Boy, I can see the headlines now. Headlines I'm responsible for. You're gonna be a hero, fellow."

I spat upon the ground, and

then irrelevantly thought I should have saved it for Sam's pet lichen.

"Yes, sir," the reporter was still raving. "What better material for a hero? A cheap chiseling little government stooge! I'll show you what I can do, what a big man I am. I'll take a little snotnose such as you, and make a world hero out of you. The publicity won't hurt me any, either."

"Look," I said wearily. "There's the hero." I pointed toward MacNab, who had got to his feet and was watching us. "If you've got to have a hero, pick on him. He deserves it. While I was lying there unconscious, and you were yelling your head off, he went into the mine and got the men out."

"That sonofabitch!" the reporter shouted, suddenly raving mad. "I'll break him. I'll hound him out of every job he gets for the rest of his life. Let me lay there and suffer, will he? While he pays more attention to the scummy miners than he does to me — ME! Kick loose, will he, when I grab at his feet, trying to get him to help me!"

I struggled to my feet. I staggered over to MacNab.

"Let's get out of here," I said. "Do you feel like driving the shuttle? Can you make it? I need to get to Marsport. Mines can blow up and the world come to an end, but the government wants its pretty reports made out on time." I was using it as an excuse. Suddenly I couldn't stay around the reporter any longer.

"Don't you want to be a hero?" MacNab asked, with a speculative look in his eyes.

"Hell!" I exclaimed in disgust. I looked at the reporter and my lip curled at him. I had forgotten to be polite.

He caught the sneer, it even penetrated his thick hide. He started to make a rush at me, to carry his bravado to its limit. He thought better of it. I was standing, ready to find out if that jutting jaw was glass.

"Why you cheap little stooge," he shouted. "I'll fix you, too. Hero, huh? Why I'll show you up as the blackest little tinhorn chiseler that ever took a bribe!"

"Let's go," MacNab said to me in a tone of respect.

We started walking through the rubble toward the beatup old shuttle.

*I suppose, grandfather, that each of us, at one time or another, would like to feel he has done something significant — that the world recognizes a thing we have done — a special thing — a thing of valour. I suppose we consider recognition as the reward for valour. But now it has been brought home to me how cheap recognition can be — how often it serves only some egomaniac's desire to build himself through reflected glory. This is no reward for valour, grandfather. I would not have such a reward.*

MacNab opened the door of the ship, and we went inside. My head was splitting with pain, and I sank down into my seat with thankfulness.

Without a word, MacNab went up into the driver's seat and touched the starter button. The shuttle took off in a roar.

We began to climb. We climbed farther. It was not necessary to climb so high. Eons before, the mountain ranges on Mars had been worn down to rolling hills.

Wearily, I turned my eyes from the scene below, and looked in puzzlement toward MacNab. He was pawing at the levers, jerking them to and fro. They moved readily, too readily. They moved as if they were free to move, unencumbered by any pull upon them. The ship continued to climb.

MacNab looked back at me. His face was pale, but there was no fear in it.

"The controls snapped," he said quietly. "I reported how worn they were, dozens of times, to the Company. They ignored my reports. Now they've snapped. I can't control the ship."

"There's nothing to do?" I asked.

"Nothing," he answered. "Nothing at all."

"I'm glad," I said, and was puzzled to hear myself saying it.

He looked at me strangely.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean that. Or rather, I guess I meant it for myself, without thinking about you."

"Then you can say it for both of us," he answered. He turned away and looked through the window in the nose of the ship. He was silent for a while, a few minutes. It was as if he felt the certainty of nothing to do, and did not pretend by futile motions to be doing anything. He knew the mechanism of the ship, what could be done in flight, and what could be done only on the ground.

It was a life raft, built to get passengers from a space liner to a landing place in emergency. No more suitable for continuous and commercial use than the olden rubber life rafts upon the sea of Earth. Except for greed and graft, it would not have been put into commercial use at all. And this time the men responsible would not be caught in their trap, they could still sit behind their desks and shake their heads and hypocritically say it was too bad, pilot must have been drinking.

"Up here," MacNab called back to me, "you can see the stars. Come up and sit in the copilot's seat. See the stars!" There was a singing ecstasy in his voice.

I left my seat and went up front.

"Just for the record," I said, "Not that I really care, but what about safety devices, escape hatches, things like that?"

"Are you kidding?" he asked.

"On an ore shuttle?"

"I'm surprised the inspectors let it operate," I commented.

"Are you?" He looked at me and smiled.

I said no more.

Yes, there were the stars beginning to show through the thin air of Mars.

MacNab was rapt again. He was in his beloved space, out among his glittering stars, the understandable stars who operated according to patterns of logic. The friendly stars — because they were not human. His eyes took on a glow to match the stars.

A strange impulse came over me. Have I a measure of ego, after all? Some futile urge to construct a monument to myself? An unworthy, human weakness, such as that?

At any rate, I took out my notebook and pencil from my pocket. I began to write. I write the new shorthand, very rapidly. It has taken me but a few minutes to jot down these concepts — all that has happened.

No, I think I am not writing to build a monument, after all. I think perhaps it is a summing up, a habit of analyzing, born of years of analyzing government regulations. I cannot let this end of life be government gobbledegook, with no sense in it. I must find out what it means.

The air is growing thinner. I know our moments are few. MacNab is leaning forward now, almost straining, as if he were trying to help the shuttle climb higher, higher into his beloved space before it falters, turns, and begins its straight downward plunge.

MacNab belongs to space and it is right that he should die in space.

And I? I belong nowhere. It does not matter where I die.

As with everyone else, I have often speculated on what I might do if I knew I must die immediately. Could I face the moment with courage?

I find it takes no courage. I find a sense of relief — almost release. I need no longer be an outcast — an honorable man in a world which knows no honor. Death reduces us all to the same level.

I find myself smiling at those human beliefs which would carry the superiority of some even beyond the grave. How self righteous we all are — how human.

Instead, I know a sense of welcome, a tremendous serenity. I find I have less dread than I knew each morning when I awoke, knowing I must deal with the world another day. I shrink less from the clean, bright points of the stars, than I did from the actions of my fellowmen.

This, then, is the true reward — not recognition, not shouts of acclaim, but the ability to face what must be with serenity.

This is the reward for valor.

# COMING IN THE NOVEMBER ISSUE

### *L. Sprague de Camp*

**THE HUNGRY HERCYNIAN**—Perhaps the most powerful wizard of the mighty Tartessian Empire was Bokarri; but when a Hercynian gets hungry, not all the wizardry of science can avail against so primitive an urge.

### *Isaac Asimov*

**EVEREST**—There could be nothing living on Mt. Everest's highest peak, yet there were the photographs. Because of them the mountain had to be climbed. The only higher climb is . . . into space!

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